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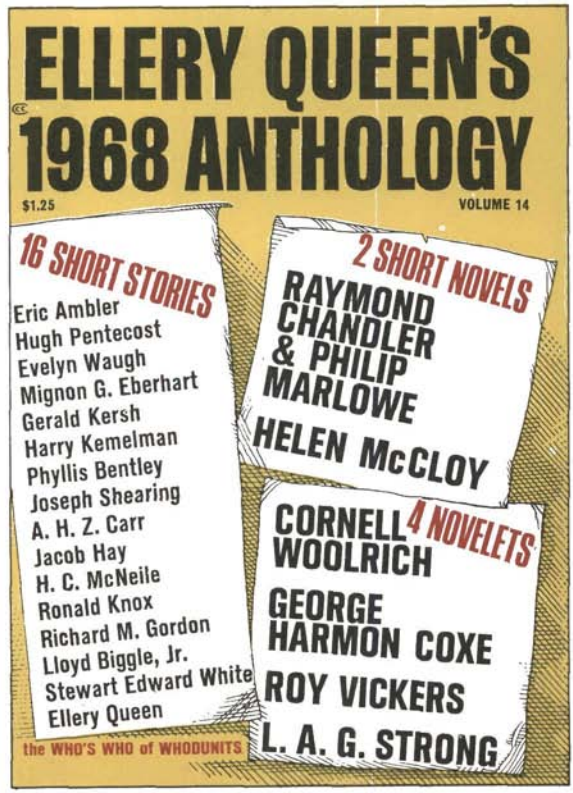

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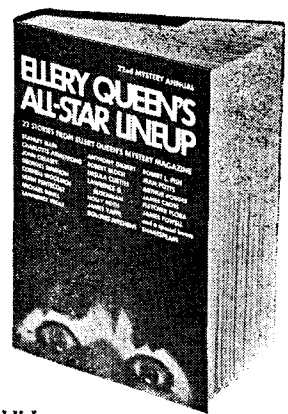

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DETECTIVE and CRIME SHORT STORIES

WEDDING ANNIVERSARY — Ellery Queen — 6

THE GREATEST SNATCH IN HISTORY — Steve April — 55

ADVENTURE OF THE MISSING THREE-QUARTERS — Robert L. Fish — 59

MURDER OF A PRIEST — Arthur Porges — 67

THE DEATH WISH — Larry Maddock — 73

THE SEVENTY-SIXTH FACE — James Leasor — 80

ALIAS MR. MANCHESTER — Youngman Carter — 115

A TALE FROM THE CHAUCER — Susan Sears — 123

THE SHADOW OF HIS ABSENCE — Frank Sisk — 135

TRAFFIC VIOLATION — William Bankier — 144

IN THE FICTION ALCOVE — Nedra Tyre — 153

BLACK MASK MAGAZINE

EAGLE IN HIS MOUTH — Frank Gruber — 17

EQMM "FIRST STORIES"

THE WASHING MACHINE — Rev. Norman E. Douglas — 88

THEY SAID IT COULDN'T BE DONE — John Pick — 92

HARDCOVERS AND PAPERBACKS OF THE MONTH — 16

BEST MYSTERIES OF THE MONTH — Anthony Boucher — 113

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the *NEWEST* Wrightsville story by

ELLERY QUEEN

Ernst Bauenfel was probably the best-loved man in Wrightsville. His benevolence was a byword—indeed, it had earned him the title of "Mr. Bountiful." He was a man without an enemy—and yet . . . One of Ellery's strangest cases—with a strange clue of the sort that only Ellery seems to encounter in these days of so much "clueless detection" . . .

WEDDING ANNIVERSARY

by ELLERY QUEEN

IN SPITE OF HIS PASSION FOR Wrightsville, hardly a visit of Ellery's does not turn up some major crime, as if in savage welcome to his gifts. Compelled to use them against the objects of his affection, he yet goes back, again and again and again, hopefully turning the other cheek. It is no reward for his devotion.

On this occasion he was beguiled by the season. The magnolias were in their improbable New England bloom, the syringa enriched the town with outcroppings of gold, the grass in Memorial Park stretched in greenest innocence, the ancient maples along State Street were in their infant leaf. It was simply not a day for death.

Or so Ellery told himself.

He cut across the Square (which is round), passed the Town Hall and the American Legion Bandstand, and turned into the alley of the County Court House Building, whose downstairs west wing houses the Wrightsville Police Department.

"I'm dodderin'," Chief Anselm Newby said, pumping Ellery's hand. "When you called from the Hollis to ask me to supper, I clean forgot about Mr. B.'s anniversary blowout. So I phoned him and he said, 'Sure, bring Mr. Queen along.' I hope you don't mind, Ellery."

It appeared that Ellery did not mind; to the contrary. Ernst Bauenfel was one of the few prominent Wrightsvillians whose path had never happened to intersect his, even though he kept running across the name in the news and advertising columns of the *Wrightsville Record,* to which he was a mail subscriber.

As the town reckoned such things, Bauenfel was a newcomer to the community. But what he lacked in local ancestry he more than made up by good works. As one of the

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leading merchants of High Village —he was a jeweler, with branches strewn about the state—Bauenfel's was to Wright County what Cartier's is to Fifth Avenue. He was a past president of the Chamber of Commerce, he held high office in most of the benevolent societies, he had twice been elected to the Board of Selectmen, he was regularly asked to take charge of the Red Cross, Community Chest, and other important drives, and his private benefactions had earned him the title of "Mr. Bountiful," which the *Record* abbreviated to Mr. B. It was said that no one ever came to Mr. B. in genuine need and went away empty-handed.

"From all I read about him," Ellery said as Chief Newby drove him up toward Hill Drive, "he's the nearest thing to a civic saint that Wrightsville's ever had."

"There isn't a living soul in Low Village or High," the police chief said, "who doesn't swear by him."

"Aren't you forgetting some juicy rumors a year ago, Anse?"

"You mean when he remarried?" Newby grunted. "You know small towns. They even talked when he got married the first time. Hester, his first wife, was a lot younger than Mr. B.—she was twenty-five when she gave birth to Amy, their only child, and Ernst was more than double that, fifty-five—and it made a lot of tongues go clickety-clack in the ladies' auxiliaries, especially since Hester was a Dade, and you know how far back the Dades go in this town. But the gabble soon died out, and there wasn't another unkind word said about Mr. B. until last year, after Hester died in that auto smashup. I mean, when he married Zelda Brown, Al Brown's youngest—the ice-cream parlor Brown—less than a month after Hester's funeral."

"What was the scoop?" Ellery asked in his nosiest Wrightsville tone. "The *Record* was annoyingly tactful."

"Well, for one thing, Zelda was Mr. B.'s secretary-bookkeeper in his Wrightsville branch store; they were together a lot. And Zelda's pretty sexy-looking. So as soon as Mr. B. married her the ladies began whispering that they'd been having an affair behind Hester's back. The damn flapmouths! I know Mr. B., and in my book he's as straight as they come. Of course, the short time between Hester's death and Ernst's remarrying helped the gossip along —"

"Some men are born for marriage," said Ellery, with the authority of one who was not.

"—but it wasn't only that. Ernst pulled the boner, or maybe in the excitement he just forgot, of marrying Zelda on what would have been Hester's birthday."

"The most generous of men," the sage pointed out, "is often the least tactful."

"Anyway, Ellery, that's ancient history. The biddies haven't found

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a thing to rip Zelda up the back for in the year she and Ernst have been hitched. She's raising Hester's kid —Amy is five now—as if she were her own flesh and blood, and that sort of thing goes a long way in this town. They're good people, Ellery. You'll like 'em."

As, indeed, Ellery did. He liked everything about the Bauenfels, from their chalet-type house with its squared-timber construction and steeply projecting eaves (evidently built by Mr. B. in an early nostalgia for his native Switzerland, to what must have been the astonishment of its Colonial neighbors on Hill Drive) to the solid *bürgerstand* furnishings of the interior.

They were simple, hearty folk, like a peasant soup. Mr. B. was portly and florid, with a gray Teutonic brush and eyes with a malty sparkle; he wore a brocaded vest festooned with a heavy gold watch-chain; and Ellery thought he needed only a tray and a white apron tied around his girth to step into a *Züricher* beer garden. As for Zelda Bauenfel, nee Brown, Ellery almost failed to recognize her. He had last seen Zelda as a nubile teen-ager working after school hours in her father's ice cream emporium on Lower Main. Now she was a well-fleshed, handsome *hausfrau* in a struggling girdle, cheerful and authoritative and obviously well-loved.

It took no seer, either, to divine the affection between Zelda and her husband's first wife's child. At the approach of the stranger, little Amy clung to her stepmother's skirt, her pale Dade eyes enormous. Zelda briskly soothed her, Ellery went to work on her, and in a few minutes the child was on his lap.

"We used to love you," Amy lisped.

"Really, Amy?" Ellery said. "When was that?"

"When my mommy was bery young."

"And that, young lady," said Zelda, pink as a geranium, "is the last time I'm ever going to tell you any of my girlish secrets! Kiss Mr. Queen and Chief Newby and your papa good night, and off to bed."

"I ought to feel jealous, Mr. Queen," chuckled Ernst Bauenfel as his wife took the little girl upstairs. "That is a secret my Zelda never confided in *me*." He had a slight German accent.

"Or me, worse luck."

"But I am not a jealous man; it is one of the things for which I thank God. Too many waste their lives envying and hating. And I am being a Saturday-night philosopher! I think that is our other guests—excuse me." And Mr. B. hastily went to the front door.

"I told you," Newby laughed.

"I'm glad I came, Anse."

But Ellery's gladness was within a half hour of destruction.

The three other guests were men also. At first Ellery suspected that the absence of ladies might be sig-

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nificant. But it turned out that Franklin Lang was a bachelor, Rob Packard was a widower, and Martin Overbrook's wife was entertaining an uninvited spring virus and had insisted on her husband not disappointing the Bauenfels on their anniversary party.

Of the three, Ellery had met only Lang. A tall weedy man with an occupational tic under his eye and bottle-fed veins in his nose, Lang was managing editor of the *Record*; Ellery's visits to Wrightsville, which the *Record* considered news, had brought them into contact from time to time. The newspaperman had always struck Ellery as rather indrawn. There was nothing indrawn about Franklin Lang this evening. He punched Mr. B.'s heavy shoulder and then threw a long arm around it.

Ellery knew Rob Packard by hearsay. He was a one-time real estate broker who had blossomed overnight into a general building contractor and had actually succeeded in supplanting that hardy Wrightsville perennial, J. C. Pettigrew, as chairman of the town's Realty Board. Packard was a red-haired man in an Italian silk suit and a bow tie, with a handshake like an oil salesman.

He, too, embraced his host.

Martin Overbrook Ellery did not know at all, although he recalled that one of the old red-brick buildings in Low Village bore the white-on-black stencil, *Overbrook Paper-box Factory,* on its grimy side walls. Overbrook was a feisty little fellow who came bursting in like the White Rabbit, glancing at his watch and crying, "Am I late, Mr. B.? I hope I'm not late—Jinny couldn't come, she's down sick—oh, she phoned Zelda, I forgot—congratulations," beaming all the while, the reports of his Yankee voice bouncing around the room like shellfire.

There were hail-fellow introductions and lively conversation, a good deal of it concerned with the unexpected presence of Wrightsville's self-adopted son; then Zelda Bauenfel came flying downstairs, everything bobbing, and there was more embracing, and some jokes about first anniversaries, and much laughter; whereupon Mrs. B. dug her elbow into Mr. B.'s meaty ribs and said, "You're a fine host, you are! Weren't you supposed to do something the very first thing?"; and Ernst Bauenfel seized his head and exclaimed, *"Ach,* I forgot! Excuse me a minute," and trotted out to return a moment later pushing a bar cart with a bucketed bottle of champagne on it and a queerly shaped liqueur bottle, six wine glasses and a liqueur glass (and now he does look like a *biergarten* waiter, Ellery grinned to himself).

"Well, open it, Ernst," said Mrs. B., "what are you standing there for?"; and Mr. B. with a sly smile said, "Before the very first thing comes the *very* first thing, Zelda," and he took from the pocket of his

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jacket a jewel box and offered it to her, saying, "As a jeweler, I know that the first anniversary gift should be a clock. But how could a clock express my feeling? Open it, *liebchen*"; and Zelda Bauenfel opened the box, and gasped, and held high a magnificent emerald bracelet, and burst into tears. Then she rushed into her husband's arms, and he said softly, "I wish I could give you the whole world, Zelda," and it was said with such simplicity that no one was embarrassed, not even Ellery, who was allergic to clichés.

And when Zelda had blown her nose, and tried on the bracelet, and everyone had exclaimed over it, Ernst Bauenfel cried, "To work!" and he began struggling with the champagne cork, popping it unexpectedly and drenching himself, his young wife laughing so hard that every curve in her body described a parabola.

Then Mr. B. was filling the wine glasses and passing them around; and when Ellery said, "You've left yourself out, Mr. Bauenfel," Mr. B. shook his head and said, "Zelda will tell you I am no drinker, Mr. Queen. I never drink anything but the liqueur, and this only on very special occasions, like tonight," and he opened the liqueur bottle and poured himself a critical quantity of its topaz-colored contents, as if each drop was precious; and then he held up his glass and said, "My friends, a toast. I give you a German proverb: When an old man marries a young wife, death laughs. To my Zelda!" and the guests echoed, "Zelda!", and drank their champagne, and Ernst Bauenfel raised his liqueur glass to his lips and looked at his blushing wife over the rim, and chuckled, and threw his head back and drained the glass—which was not, in Ellery's view, the respectful way to imbibe a prized liqueur, even in a toast—and then the jeweler's eyes opened wide, and he clutched his throat with a hoarse cry and groped with the other hand as if seeking something to hang onto, and finally fell heavily to the floor, where he lay, incredibly, writhing.

And Ellery found himself on his knees beside the stricken man, saying, "Poison, poison. Anse, call Conk Farnham—hurry!" and while Chief Newby ran to phone Dr. Farnham, Franklin Lang led an open-mouthed young wife away, and Rob Packard and Martin Overbrook hovered over their recumbent friend with popping eyes. The writhings had stilled and the breathing had become shallow and very rapid. The complexion was already that of a corpse.

"Mr. Bauenfel—Ernst," Ellery said urgently. "Can you hear me? Do you know who did this? Who poisoned your liqueur?"

The cyanosing lips tried desperately to tell him. But they could not. Then an odd thing happened. The dying man's left hand fumbled its way to his abdomen and found the

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lower left-hand pocket of his brocaded vest. With his forefinger and thumb he made his way in little stabs into the pocket. Then he withdrew his fingers and stretched out his hand as if offering something, and his heavy body arched like a drawn bow, and released its arrow.

And there he lay.

"Dead," said Ellery bitterly. "I swear I'll never set foot in Wrightsville again."

But then he opened Ernst Bauenfel's left hand.

In it lay a large unset diamond.

"What was he trying to tell you?" Packard, the building contractor, muttered.

"With a diamond, of all things," said little Overbrook, the paperbox manufacturer. "Why a diamond?"

But before Ellery could reply, Chief Newby came back.

"Dr. Farnham will be over as soon as they locate him," said the police chief, and then he stopped. "He's *dead?"* he said, looking down at his friend. "Mr. B.?"

"I'm sorry, Anse."

"You're sorry. We were his best friends."

"I know." And after a moment Ellery said, "A quick-acting poison. It can only have been in that bottle of whatever it is—the liqueur."

"Who could have wanted to kill Ernst?" said Packard. There were tears in his eyes; and Overbrook turned away.

The police chief picked up the bottle by the neck, sniffed its contents, and set it softly down. He was one of those occasional small compact men who contrive to look as if they are made of rock. His sensitive face was now as hard as the rest of him. He went over to the settee, unfolded an afghan, and draped it carefully over Ernst Bauenfel's body. Then he turned away, saying, "I never heard of this stuff," jerking his head toward the liqueur bottle. "What is it?"

Ellery came to. He inspected the label. "It's new to me, too. Made at a monastery in Switzerland. Zelda should know."

"Zelda does know," said Zelda; and the newly made widow appeared in the archway, followed by Lang, who was shaking his head as if to say, "I couldn't keep her away." The young woman's face was blotched from weeping, but it was set in as rocky planes as Newby's. She went over to the corner of the settee, near her husband's body, and sat down. "No, I'm all right," she said as Ellery and Newby stepped toward her. "I want to help. I've got to help. Mr. Queen, what do you want to know?"

"All about the liqueur. I've never heard of it."

"It's never been sold outside Switzerland, because the monks could only make small quantities. Ernst adored it—it's the only alcohol he could drink, as he told you. Then the monastery was disbanded. Ernst bought up as many bottles as he

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could find—about half a dozen, I think it was—and brought them with him from the old country when he came to the United States."

"How many bottles are left?"

"This is the last one. He kept hoarding it. It's the only thing Ernst was selfish about."

"That's true, Ellery," Franklin Lang said. "Ernst would give you the socks off his feet, but in all the years I knew him he never offered me a drink out of this bottle. Did he ever offer you any, Rob?"

Packard shook his head, and Martin Overbrook said, "Mr. B. dead. It's not possible," and again turned away.

"In other words, no one ever drank from this bottle except your husband, Zelda? Not even you?"

"That's right, Mr. Queen." Now she was struggling to control her voice. "In fact, tonight is the first time I've seen even Ernst drink any, there's so little left in the bottle. He was trying to make it last as long as possible."

"Then the poison could only have been intended for him," Chief Newby said in harsh tones. "And what's this I heard about a diamond, Ellery?"

"When you went to phone Farnham, I asked Bauenfel if he knew who poisoned him. He tried to talk but couldn't. The last act of his life was to take the diamond out of his vest pocket."

The police chief examined it. "I don't see anything special about it except its size. Do you know anything about this, Zelda?"

The young widow shook her head. "I didn't even know he was carrying it. Ernst often had unset gems in his pockets. Most jewelers do."

"He was trying to answer your question, Mr. Queen. Is that what you think?" asked the contractor.

"I don't see what other construction we can put on the last responsive act of a dying man," Ellery said. "Who killed you? I ask him, and he answers with a diamond. So we have to start from the diamond."

"A diamond," said the paperbox man, "is a diamond."

"Yes, Mr. Overbrook, but it also stands for something. Remember the occasion. This was his wedding anniversary party; the anniversary was uppermost on Ernst Bauenfel's mind. So let's think of a diamond in relation to wedding anniversaries.

"In the traditional listing," said Ellery, "the diamond is associated with the sixtieth and seventy-fifth wedding anniversaries. In that list the gift for a first anniversary is paper. But when Ernst, earlier this evening, mentioned the gift *he* associated with first anniversaries, he didn't say paper, he said a clock. Well, the clock as a first-anniversary gift happens to head the official list authorized by the jewelry industry. In the jewelers' list a diamond represents the thirtieth wedding anniversary. Ernst was a jeweler. We have the right to assume that, in

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answering my question as to who poisoned him, he replied with the jeweler's symbol for thirty."

"Thirty," muttered Chief Newby. "Who the devil could he have meant by thirty? It makes no sense."

Ellery was silent. Suddenly he said, "I hope no one will mind if I make an experiment? Mr. Overbrook, do you have a connection with anything associated with thirty?"

The little manufacturer jumped. "You mean you suspect me of having poisoned Mr. B.'s bottle?" he sputtered. "I don't like your experiment, Mr. Queen! Or your question!"

"Why don't you answer it, Martie?" asked Zelda Bauenfel quietly.

"What do you mean, Zelda? I couldn't have been closer to Ernst if I'd been his brother!"

"Yes, Martie," she said, "but have you forgotten about the loan?"

"Loan?" Overbrook licked his lips. "I don't see what that has to do with anything . . ."

"What loan?" asked Ellery.

"This is ridiculous! Three years ago I was foreman of the paperbox factory. The owner decided to retire. He offered me the chance to buy him out, but I didn't have nearly enough cash to put down, and I couldn't give the bank the collateral they wanted. Ernst came to my rescue. Without a cent of collateral he loaned me enough to finance my purchase of the factory."

"How much was the loan?"

Overbrook licked his lips again. "Thirty thousand dollars." He went on quickly, "But that's just a coincidence—"

"It may well be, because at least one other thirty is represented here." And Ellery swung about to face Franklin Lang.

"Me?" said Lang.

"I'm afraid so, Frank. As a newspaperman and managing editor of the *Record,* you don't have to be reminded that the numeral 30 written at the end of newspaper copy means 'the end'; it's a trade-wide symbol in journalism, at least in this country. I merely point it out, Frank."

The newspaperman snapped, "I felt toward Ernst the way Martie Overbrook and Rob Packard did, and everyone else in town. Four years ago I was hospitalized for eight months after an operation. I had no savings, and the medical expenses were enormous. Well, for almost that entire period Mr. B. paid my bills. Does it stand to reason I'd repay him with poison? It wasn't even a loan—Ernst wouldn't hear of my paying him back. Besides, about this thirty nonsense—how many people outside the newspaper field have ever heard of it?"

"A point," Ellery conceded. He looked at the building contractor. "I wonder, Mr. Packard, about you."

"And thirty?" Rob Packard nodded slowly. "It's a queer thing, Mr. Queen, but there's a tie between me and Ernst, too, in that regard. It was Ernst who got me out of the realty

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brokerage game. He owned a parcel out in Hill Valley, near the airport, and he came to me with a proposition. He foresaw that Wrightsville housing was going to expand in that direction, and he offered to put up the land and the financing, with me providing the know-how and the management, on a partnership basis. I snapped at it like a trout. It started me out as a building contractor. We named the development Thirty Acres, from the amount of land we built on. You'll find it on all the newer maps of Wrightsville." Then Packard said, "Does that sound as if I'd want to kill Ernst Bauenfel?"

Ellery said ruefully, "I admit, motive in this case is the tough one. Probably half of Wrightsville could come up with similar favors that Mr. B. did for them. By the way, Zelda," he said suddenly, turning to her, "your husband was a wealthy man. And you're young enough to have been his daughter. Forgive me, but it's happened before. At the least, his death would mean to you —"

"In terms of gain, Mr. Queen," said Zelda Bauenfel, examining him as if he were a germ under a microscope, "absolutely nothing. When we got married a year ago, I insisted that Ernst write a will to leave Amy everything he had. I had reasons for this which aren't anyone's business, but in view of what's happened I'll tell you.

"In the first place there was the talk, as I suppose you've heard. Well, I didn't want Ernst—when he heard the gossip—to think I'd married him for his money.

"In the second place I wanted to protect Amy and, incidentally, reassure Ernst about her future. After all, I wasn't her real mother, and if Ernst died before I did, which was likely, he being so much older than I, Amy would be left to my care. We had quite an argument about the will. Finally, Ernst compromised. He made it out in such a way that, after three years, Amy and I would share his estate equally.

"With Ernst dead now, after only one year, I'm left with nothing. Why would I kill him? As unthinkable as that is."

"Not unthinkable," said Ellery gently. "Here's a possible reason, as old as the hills and as new as this spring: another man."

Her chin came up. "You look for one, Mr. Queen. You, too, Anse. Look all you want. You won't find any. I love my husband, and I've been faithful to him."

Ellery half turned away, frowning.

"Don't any of you blame Mr. Queen," said Chief Newby in a mumble. "Questions like these have to be asked . . . Zelda, Ernst kept the liqueur bottle in the liquor cabinet in the dining room, didn't he? Did he keep the cabinet locked?"

"Ernst never locked anything here, Anse. You know that."

"Then anybody could have got to

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that bottle! I don't know how many people in town have been entertained in this house at one time or another. We'll fingerprint the bottle, but my hunch is this is going to be a long, long job."

"Maybe not so long," said Ellery; and he turned to the widow again. "Zelda, you and Ernst weren't married in Wrightsville, were you?"

The question took her by surprise. "Well, no, Mr. Queen. We thought it . . . best to do it in Connhaven, and we went straight on to New York, where we spent our honeymoon. We left Amy with my mother while we were away."

"Then that could be it." Unaccountably, Ellery looked relaxed and relieved. "There's no legal proof, Anse, but I can give you a theory that covers all the facts."

"Earlier this evening," said Ellery, "Zelda said that she had never seen Ernst take a drink of his private-stock liqueur before tonight. In recalling this, I wondered why he hadn't dipped into it when he and Zelda were married, which would surely be one of those extra-special occasions on which he could be expected to indulge. Zelda just gave us the reason: they weren't married in Wrightsville, and they spent their honeymoon in New York. So Mr. B. had no access to the bottle when he and Zelda married.

"Since only three or four weeks elapsed between his first wife's funeral and his remarriage, it's reasonable to assume that Ernst had last taken a drink from that bottle during his first marriage—*that is, while Hester Dade was still alive.*

"Put that together," said Ellery swiftly, "with the climate in this town a year ago. There was plenty of talk, you told me, Anse, when Mr. B. and Zelda Brown married. Zelda was working for Ernst up to that time. Suppose before her fatal automobile accident Hester had got a jump on the gossips—suspected that there was something going on between her husband and his secretary-bookkeeper. Suppose, true or not, it became an *idée fixe* in Hester's mind. Suppose, in her jealousy, Hester poured poison into the bottle of liqueur from which only her husband ever drank."

"Hester," Zelda Bauenfel whispered.

"Tonight, when he realized he had been poisoned," Ellery went on, "Mr. B. remembered something, just what we'll never learn. But it was enough to convince him that his liqueur had been poisoned by Hester. Unable to speak, he used his last strength and took out the diamond to leave us a clue—the 'thirty' clue. He was too far gone to realize that it might point to his three best friends as well."

"I still don't get it," complained the police chief. "How does this thirty thing tag Hester for the poisoning?"

"You told me yourself, Anse, on our drive up here. Hester, you said,

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was twenty-five years old when she gave birth to Amy. Amy is now five. You also told me that Ernst married Zelda on Hester's birthday. So today is not only Ernst's and Zelda's first wedding anniversary, *it would have been Hester's thirtieth birthday.*"

Chief Anselm Newby was never able to prove that Hester Dade Bauenfel reached out from the grave to kill Mr. Bountiful, but then Newby never pinned the murder on anyone else, either. To tell the truth, he didn't try very hard.

As for Ellery, while it is to be doubted that his absence will remain permanent, the fact is he has not yet paid another visit to his favorite scene of the crime, Wrightsville.

CURRENT MYSTERY AND SUSPENSE HARDCOVERS

AUTHOR	TITLE	PUBLISHER	PRICE	DUE DATE
Buzzati, Dino	LARGER THAN LIFE	Walker & Company	$3.95	7/31
Durston, P. E. H.	MORTISSIMO	Random House	4.95	8/22
Engberg, Edward	THE SPY IN THE CORPORATE STRUCTURE	World Publishing	5.95	8/1
Forbes, Stanton	ENCOUNTER DARKNESS	Doubleday	3.95	8/4
Garve, Andrew	A VERY QUIET PLACE	Harper & Row	4.50	8/2
Hitchens, Dolores	POSTSCRIPT TO NIGHTMARE	G. P. Putnam's	3.95	8/15
Masterson, Whit	*PLAY LIKE YOU'RE DEAD*	Dodd, Mead	3.95	8/14
McCutcheon, Hugh	AND THE MOON WAS FULL	Doubleday	3.95	8/4
Turner, William Price	BOUND TO DIE	Walker & Company	3.95	8/16
Van Gulik, Robert	MURDER IN CANTON	Charles Scribner's	3.95	8/3
Whitten, Leslie H.	MOON OF THE WOLF	Doubleday	3.95	8/18

CURRENT MYSTERY AND SUSPENSE PAPERBACKS

AUTHOR	TITLE	PUBLISHER	PRICE	DUE DATE
Ford, Leslie	ALL FOR THE LOVE OF A LADY	Popular Library	$ .60	8/3
Frome, David	MR. PINKERTON FINDS A BODY	Popular Library	.60	8/17
Rabe, Peter	CODE NAME GADGET	Gold Medal (Orig.)	.50	7/27

Titles and Data Supplied by the Publishers

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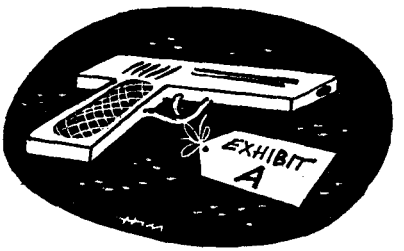
a revival of **Black Mask** *department*



first *NEW* short story in 26 years by

FRANK GRUBER

Frank Gruber is the creator of Johnny Fletcher, private eye, and Simon Lash, connoisseur of rare books, and probably most enduringly, Oliver Quade, "The Human Encyclopedia," the pitchman with the photographic memory. For reasons best known to Mr. Gruber (and perhaps known only to him) Frank Gruber has not written a detective short story since 1941. Now we bring you Mr. Gruber's first new short story in 26 years, and it offers a new character, Harry Ives, and (so far as we can recollect) a new type of detective—a process server . . . Here, then, is the strange case of the cowboy-singer-guitarist with a flying eagle in his mouth . . .

We hope to have other new stories soon for this department—many readers have asked us to revive **Black Mask,** *to revive its gory glory and to take a gander at the grandeur that once was . . .*

EAGLE IN HIS MOUTH

by FRANK GRUBER

HIS ELECTRIC GUITAR GLEAMED with inlaid rhinestones and the twanging that came from it probably wasn't bad—if one liked an electric guitar played good and loud. At its worst it was better than the voice of the guitar player. He was clad in a glittering cowboy-singer-guitarist costume and he sang a round dozen of the country-

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music favorites, including *On Top of Old Smoky, Red River Valley,* and *Green Grow the Lilacs.*

The audience couldn't have cared less, but three or four of them applauded Jimmy Boss because they were nice people, not too drunk, and nice people will applaud any entertainment, especially if there is no charge, except for the drinks.

Only one of the patrons of the Pegasus à Go-Go really applauded enthusiastically. He was still applauding as he got to his feet and followed Boss into the wings.

"Jimmy, boy," he chortled, "I like your yodeling. I like it real fine and I'm sorry I've got to do this to you." He pulled a folded document out of his pocket and thrust it into Boss's hand.

Boss caught the single word on the outside of the document. "Subpoena!" he cried.

"Yep," said the subpoena server, whose name was Harry Ives, "it's that little old mink stole you bought from Frankenhof Furs a couple of years ago. They want the money you owe them."

"I haven't got it," howled Jimmy Boss, "and I haven't got the fur, neither. I gave it to Trixie. Get it from her!"

"Sorry, old man, that ain't the way the game's played. That little old mink stole became second-hand the minute you took it out of the store. And it's gonna cost you exactly eight hundred and forty-two dollars and eighty-four cents."

"I won't pay it!" roared Jimmy Boss.

"It's out of my hands, Mister Boss," said Ives mockingly. "Tell it to the judge." He wheeled suddenly as a lean swarthy man came out of a door nearby. "Mr. Petrakis?"

The dark man nodded. "What the hell's going on here?"

"He's a process server," wailed Jimmy Boss. "He just slapped me with a summons."

Petrakis grunted. "You buzzards work day and night, don't you? If there's one thing I hate it's a stinking process server." He stabbed a well-manicured forefinger at Ives. "Tell me something, will you?"

"Why not, Mr. Petrakis?"

"When you look at yourself in the bathroom mirror in the morning, how do you keep from cutting your own throat?"

"It ain't easy," said Ives. "I hate myself in the morning and I hate myself at night. It's a mean, low-down way to make a living, I'll admit that, but on the other hand, how do *you* feel about the way you make *your* living—topless waitresses, selling booze to kids, singers like our friend here?"

The swarthy night-club owner drew back his fist, but Ives took a quick step backward. "It's strictly against the law to slug a process server, Mr. Petrakis. Besides—" his hand whisked to his pocket and came out with another folded document—"here's a little paper for *you* —an attachment on Boss's salary."

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"Oh, no!" groaned Jimmy Boss.

Petrakis barely glanced at the court order. "How much they trying to get from you, Boss?"

Ives answered for Boss. "Eight hundred forty-two and eighty-four cents."

Petrakis nodded thoughtfully. "Tell you what, Boss. I was gonna hold you over a second week, but what'd be the use? They'd grab it, every nickel, so I'm going to fire you tonight. I owe you two and a half bills; the deductions will bring the net down to one-fifty, one-sixty. Let 'em attach that and whistle for the rest." He reached out and clapped the cowboy-singer's shoulder. "How's that, buddy-boy?"

Jimmy Boss choked. "I've got just about four bucks in my pocket."

"The geetar, Boss," suggested Ives. "Law says you can't put a lien on a mechanic's tools and the geetar's your tool, I guess. You ought to be able to get ten-fifteen bucks on it."

"Ten, fifteen—" gasped Jimmy Boss. "I paid two hundred and fifty dollars for this here guitar!"

"So maybe Uncle will give you twenty-five."

A glint came into Boss's eyes. "I've got a better idea." He whipped up the electric guitar and brought it down on Ives's head. The instrument gave out a very unsatisfactory bong, but Ives didn't hear it. The guitar was made of good, honest material and when it crashed on Ives's head he went down and out.

The process server came to in the alley behind the Pegasus à Go-Go. For five minutes he lay on the pavement retching and trying to get to his feet. When he made it, he reeled to the back door of the night club. He had barely touched the door when it was opened by a very large, very truculent-looking man who was obviously the Pegasus à Go-Go's bouncer.

"Beat it," the very large man said.

"Ten bucks," croaked Ives, "ten bucks for the name of Boss's hotel."

The bouncer held out a meaty hand.

Ives fished a thin packet of bills from his pocket and skimmed off two fives. The big man grabbed them and stuffed them into a pocket.

"He ain't stayin' at no hotel," he said. "He's got his own trailer and it's parked in a trailer court out on Ventura."

"Which one?"

"How many trailer courts are there on Ventura?"

"Ten," said Ives, "maybe twenty or thirty if you go out far enough."

The club bouncer shrugged. "So try 'em all."

Two hours later Ives was out in Woodland Hills. He had tried nine trailer courts and was about ready to call it a night. He decided to try one more.

It was the right one.

The night manager spoke unkindly to Ives for having awakened him at three o'clock in the morning.

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but he pointed. "Second row, third or fourth trailer. Can't miss it—his name's on it."

Ives left his car in front of the manager's office and followed the instructions. The park was fairly well lighted and he had no difficulty finding Boss's home on wheels. Painted on the side of an expensive trailer was the legend:

Americas' Favorite Cowboy Singer
JIMMY BOSS

The trailer door was open a couple of inches and there was a light on inside.

Ives started to knock on the door, then decided to surprise the man inside. He pushed open the door quietly, stepped into the trailer, and held his fist ready.

But he never had a chance to use it.

The cowboy-singer lay on the floor, face up, his hands folded just below the hilt of a switchblade knife deeply embedded in Boss's chest.

One glance was enough. Jimmy Boss was dead.

For an instant Ives's feet were frozen to the floor. A shudder ran through his lean body and then his feet moved—backward. He collided with a floor lamp, which almost toppled. He whirled, caught the lamp, and steadied it. As he did, the light gleamed on something in Jimmy Boss's mouth.

The dead man's lips were drawn back, his teeth clenched on a shiny piece of metal. Ives forced himself to move forward and bend over the dead man. He gripped the edge of the piece of metal, pulled, and it came away.

Straightening, he moved to the light and examined the shiny disk. It was a U.S. coin, dated 1856, its denomination clearly indicated—ONE CENT. On the other side was a flying eagle with the date below and above it, and the words UNITED STATES OF AMERICA.

Ives was not a numismatist, but he had seen a coin collector's catalogue or two in his time and remembered that this coin had been legal tender for a few years just before the Civil War, prior to the introduction of the Indian-head pennies.

He was still looking at the coin when a car door slammed outside.

Stooping quickly, Ives dropped the coin into his loosely fitting loafer shoe. A light outside struck the trailer and a voice, deep and authoritative, called out, "This is the police. Come on out—carefully!"

"With your hands up in the air!" cried out a second voice.

Ives was in for it. He stepped to the door of the trailer and said, "I'm coming out—with my hands up."

He opened the door, raised his hands, and stepped down to the ground. A flashlight beam blinded him so that he was aware only of one of the policemen brushing his shoulder as he went by.

The policeman called, after a moment. "It wasn't no false alarm, Sergeant. He's dead, all right."

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The flashlight was doused, and for a moment Ives could not see the police sergeant facing him with a drawn gun. But he heard his pronouncement: "It is my duty to warn you that anything you say may be used against you."

Ives was permitted to make his one telephone call shortly before six o'clock. It was nine thirty when Ganzer, the head of A.A.A., which stood for Acme Adjustment Agency, showed up at the Valley police station. He was accompanied by a fat, prematurely bald man, with a brief case.

Ganzer's first words, on seeing Ives, were: "Did you do it, Harry?"

"Please, Mr. Ganzer," warned the other man, obviously a lawyer. "You mustn't say that around here. They'll use it against him at the trial."

"I went his bail," objected Ganzer. "I got a right to know."

It is one thing to work for a collection agency, it is something else to own one. A man who *owns* a collection agency is the lowest form of human life and if he happens to *like* owning a collection agency, there are no words in Webster's unabridged to describe such a specimen. And Ganzer *liked* owning a collection agency.

Ives had made himself a promise, which he had often repeated to himself during the three months he had worked for A.A.A. The day he quit working for Ganzer he was going to give his employer a punch in the nose, with plenty of schmaltz behind the blow.

He didn't quit, not just now. He waited until he had retrieved his necktie and belt, his money and his personal belongings, from the desk sergeant. He even waited until they had left the police station and reached the parking lot. Then he said to his employer, "Mr. Ganzer, I hereby resign from A.A.A."

The sound of the crunching of cartilage in Ganzer's nose, the feel of the blood that spurted from Ganzer's nostrils and smeared Ives's fist, were deeply satisfying to Ives.

"I'll cancel your bail!" shrieked Ganzer, "I'll let you rot in jail!"

He was still screaming as Ives walked calmly out of the lot.

He walked a mile to Ventura Boulevard and after waiting for twenty minutes, boarded a bus bound for the city. He reached his hotel, the Yucca on Ivar, shortly before twelve o'clock.

In his room he took off his coat and shirt, washed himself, and examined the bruise on his head caused by Boss's electric guitar. There was a large aching lump, but it would go away in a week or two.

What was more unpleasant were Ives's thoughts. He did not think Ganzer would have his bail revoked. Ives had, after all, been an employee of Ganzer's when he had served the paper on Jimmy Boss. Ganzer could not get away from that.

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But Ives was now on his own. The charge was not murder, for the anonymous caller to the police station had reported a fearful row between Jimmy Boss and a "visitor." The attendant at the trailer court would certainly testify that Ives had been in Boss's trailer for only a minute or two before the arrival of the police. He couldn't have been the one who had the "fearful row" with Boss.

It wasn't good, however, and Ives realized that he had to scramble around and somehow get himself out of the mess. He sat down on the edge of the bed and slipped his foot out of his right loafer. He reached down, picked up the shoe, and upended it.

The 1856 Flying Eagle fell into the palm of his hand. He examined it. The coin was in excellent condition, despite its age. It wasn't entirely new, for it showed some wear, but it certainly had not been in circulation long.

Was it a valuable coin?

He reached for the Yellow Directory, looked up Coin Dealers, and after a moment picked up the telephone and asked the hotel operator to get him a number.

"Calderwood Coin Gallery," said a precise voice in his ear.

Ives said, "I want to get an idea of what an old coin is worth—an 1856 cent. It's got an eagle on one side—"

"An 1856 Flying Eagle. You have such a coin?"

"I'm looking at it right now. It's a white coin, probably made of silver or nickel—"

"The value, sir, would depend greatly on its condition. I would have to see the coin—"

"Oh, this coin is in pretty good condition. What you'd call fine, I guess. I just wanted to know if it would be worth my coming in to show it to you."

"Yes, sir, it would certainly be worth your while. Would you mind giving me your name and telephone number?"

"No, I don't mind at all, but can you give me just a rough idea of what an 1856 Flying Eagle would be worth?"

"As I told you, it would depend on the condition—"

"All right," snapped Ives. "I was going to come in with the coin, but if you can't give me any idea of what it's worth I'll call some other dealer—"

"No, no," exclaimed the voice on the telephone, no longer so calm and precise. "Come to *me!* I'll give you at least five hundred dollars for it. More, if the condition warrants."

Ives replaced the receiver on the hook.

He stared at the coin in his hand.

Five hundred dollars. Perhaps even a thousand. And the murderer of Jimmy Boss had left it between the dead man's teeth!

Ives felt like going to bed and sleeping about ten hours, but there were too many thoughts nagging

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at him. He got out a clean shirt, put it on, then put on his coat and left the hotel.

A taxicab was in front of the hotel.

"Woodland Hills," said Ives, getting into the cab.

"You kiddin'?" exclaimed the cabby. "That's halfway to San Francisco."

"It's fifteen miles, give or take a mile or two," snapped Ives.

"A ten-dollar haul—"

"I'll pay the meter," said Ives, "and a ten per cent tip."

The cab driver was still dubious, but he started the cab, drove onto Cahuenga, reached the freeway, then let out the cab to a steady sixty miles an hour.

He left the freeway in Woodland Hills and Ives got out in front of the Happy Hollow Trailer Court.

He paid the meter charge, added a careful ten per cent, and started into the park. His car had been moved, but it was near the entrance. He walked to it, climbed in, and found the keys gone.

The manager of the court came out of his office. "Cost you a dollar for parking here."

Ives gave him a dollar and drove out of the trailer park. He took the Ventura Freeway to the San Diego Freeway and then south to Slauson.

It was a few minutes to two when he reached the Pegasus à Go-Go in Inglewood. He stopped in the parking lot next to the à Go-Go joint and studied the neon sign over the low building. A cartoonist, drawing a caricature of Ives at that moment, would have put a balloon over his head and a blazing electric light bulb in the balloon.

He entered the club. Apparently there was no entertaining during daylight hours and the lunch crowd had already been served, so there were only a few bar patrons.

One of them was not seated. She was a striking blonde, wearing a tight, short skirt that revealed everything it was supposed to reveal. She was haranguing the bartender who was trying to polish a glass to pieces.

"I got a watch," she was saying, "and I can tell time, but I don't give a damn what time it is. I want to see His Nibs now, *not* tonight."

"Lady," said the bartender, "and I'm using the term loosely, the boss don't show up before four o'clock, even if the joint burns down."

"Get on the Don Ameche," said the blonde, "call him and tell him Trixie's here and if he ain't here in twenty minutes I'm gonna start breakin' up all those nice bottles of booze you got lined up there."

The bartender groaned. "The bouncer don't show up until the boss gets here, so I got to do the bouncin' when he ain't around. I don't like to give no dames the bum's rush, but if I gotta, I gotta." He started for the end of the bar.

"You bounce Trixie," said Ives, "you've got to bounce me, too."

The bartender looked at Ives. "I can take you, Mister!" he said.

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"You can try," said Ives, "but you're going to lose some teeth in the process and while you're counting them I'm going to help Trixie smash those nice bottles of booze."

"Whaddya want from *me?*" cried the bartender. "I on'y work here and I got my orders."

"His address," said Ives. "Give us his address and we'll go call on him personally. Then nothing'll be broken, not even your head."

"You heard the man," snapped Trixie.

The bartender's tongue flicked out, moistened his lips. Then he shrugged in surrender. "Six fourteen Bristol."

"See," said Ives, "It wasn't hard."

He turned to the blonde. "All right, Trixie, let's go and see our mutual friend, George Petrakis."

"No friend of mine," snapped Trixie. She glowered at Ives. "And I got me a large idea about *you* Mister. I know what you want—and you're wastin' your time."

Ives took Trixie's arm in a firm grip. "Let's talk about it on the way to George's place."

Trixie called Ives a few choice names, but his grip on her arm was unrelenting as he escorted her out of the Pegasus à Go-Go to the parking lot.

He then told her a few things about himself, the business of serving Jimmy Boss with the subpoena, the banging on the head with the electric guitar, and the discovery of the body of Jimmy Boss in his trailer in Woodland Hills. When he finished, tears were oozing from Trixie's eyes.

"I was in love with the big slob," she bawled. "He was a cheap, two-timing, two-bit yodeler who couldn't get a good booking to save his life, but we were in love once. He bought me a mink stole and we were gonna get married, then all of a sudden, wham, he up and skipped town and I never heard another word from him."

Ives interrupted her tale of love and woe. "You can bet the bartender's called Petrakis by now and warned him we're on the way there. I'm sure he won't want to see us at his place. He's probably on his way back here—where he can be reasonably safe, with his goons around him. You'd like to give it to him, Trixie?"

"I'll scratch his eyes out," cried Trixie. "He was the reason Jimmy took it on the lam two years ago. That much I got out of him at the time. He said he caught Jimmy going through the cash in his safe and threatened to have him arrested, so Jimmy beat it. But if that was true, how come he booked Jimmy back into the place?"

"I think I can give you the answer—if you'll keep Petrakis busy here at the club while I look through his place."

Trixie gave Ives a sharp look. "How do I know—?"

"You don't," said Ives.

Trixie gave him a long look, then

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nodded abruptly. "What do you want me to do?"

"Wait here. Argue with him, keep him busy. For at least half an hour, that's all."

"And then?"

"Blow. I live at the Yucca Hotel on Ivar. If I don't come back here you'll find me there—or in the county jail."

Trixie was not too happy about it, but she decided to string along with Ives who nodded, got into his car, and left the parking lot.

Bristol was not too far from the club and Ives got there in less than ten minutes. He deliberately drove past 614. It was an attractive ranch-style house, with a wall completely around it. A two-car garage was at the front, left. The garage doors were down.

Ives parked a half block up the street from Petrakis' house. He waited five minutes, then got out of his car and strolled back to 614. He went up to the front door, touched the pearl button in the paneling beside the door. He heard chimes bong inside, waited a full minute, then pressed the door button again.

There was still no reply, so Ives walked to the side of the house. He opened a gate that led into the yard and passed a window of the garage. He peered inside. The garage was empty.

There was a swimming pool in the back yard, and a patio with a barbecue outfit.

It took Ives all of ten seconds to unlock the patio door that led to the living room. He did it with a nail file.

He stepped into the house. It was silent inside and he was certain there was no one in it. He passed up the living room, entered a den. The walls were lined with books. George Petrakis was obviously a reading man.

They were good books, too. Many of them were about Greece, a few even in Greek. Ives had no difficulty finding a copy of Edith Hamilton's MYTHOLOGY. He looked up Pegasus and nodded thoughtfully as he confirmed the fact that Pegasus was the winged horse of mythology. Then he looked up the name Charon in the index and found the reference.

Charon was the boatman who took the dead souls across the River Styx. It was customary in ancient Greece, and in Rome, to put a coin in the mouth of a dead person—Charon's fare to insure a safe trip to the hereafter.

A coin had been in the mouth of Jimmy Boss. His murderer had put it there.

But why an 1856 Flying Eagle?

There were several books on rare coins and coin collecting. A half dozen were in red covers—dated annual editions of the same title. The latest was A GUIDE BOOK OF UNITED STATES COINS, 16th Edition, 1966, by R. S. Yeoman.

Ives found the section on "Cents." He stared at the picture of an 1856 Flying Eagle and exclaimed softly

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when he saw the catalogue valuation of the coin in Fine, Extra Fine, and Uncirculated condition. The coin he drew from his pocket was undoubtedly in Extra Fine condition. It was listed at $2000.

He put the coin back into his pocket and returned the book to the shelf.

He had been in the house ten minutes. He had learned some things, but he did not yet know the one all-important fact.

Why? And why an 1856 Flying Eagle?

He left the book-lined den, went into a well furnished bedroom. He crossed into a second bedroom, apparently a guest room, more plainly furnished and just a trifle musty. He then went back to the living room, into a dining alcove, and then into the kitchen.

Petrakis was or had a very good housekeeper. The kitchen was spotless. Off the kitchen was a service porch and beyond the porch, a maid's room.

As he looked into the maid's room Ives smelled something. Unable to place the odor, he sniffed a few times. It was a sort of metallic smell, but he could not figure out the reason for such an odor in a maid's room.

The room was small, modestly furnished. An enamel-topped table stood in the center of the room. There were some brown stains on it. Ives touched one of them, then bent over and smelled it. The odor of burned or smelted metal was stronger. He looked toward the closet door, then crossed quickly to it. The smell was even stronger here.

He switched on the ceiling light. The closet was shallow, only about three feet in width and depth. Ives tapped the back wall, which was made of wood, instead of being plastered, as were the side walls.

The wood gave off a hollow sound. Ives stepped back and raising his right foot, smashed it against the wooden wall, putting all his weight into the kick.

The wood did not break, but it splintered, and the entire wall turned out to be a door. Ives pushed it in and found that there was an inner closet, also three feet wide, but at least six in depth.

There was an enamel-topped table in the little room. On it stood a small retort furnace that had been used probably as late as the night before. There was also a small punch press, which had a pair of dies for punching out coins.

On the table itself was the evidence.

About 100 gleaming brand-new 1856 Flying Eagle cents! And several strips of metal from which the coins had been punched.

Ives scooped the mint coins into a neat pile. And then he heard a sound that sent a cold shiver up his spine. The maid's room was close to the garage and what he heard was the sound of the garage door

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being raised and then a car moving into the garage.

George Petrakis had come home. He would be in the house in a matter of seconds. If he came in by way of the front door, Ives had a chance to get out the back way, through the kitchen. He might even reach the street before Petrakis would be after him.

But Ives knew that Petrakis would not come in by the front door. He would come out of the garage, through the kitchen door, and collide with Ives leaving the maid's room.

It was split-second timing. Ives did the first thing that came to his mind. He kicked off his right shoe, tore off his sock, and bringing it up to the enamel-topped table, dropped a handful of the coins into the sock, about a half pound of them.

Petrakis was in the kitchen by then. With one foot bare, Ives sprang from the inner closet, hurtled out of the outer closet, and was wheeling to get out of the maid's room when Petrakis came lunging toward him.

There was a flat automatic in the night-club owner's right hand.

"Got you!" cried Petrakis.

Ives struck twice with the weighted sock. The first blow was on Petrakis' right hand. The gun roared as the weighted sock hit it, then the gun was on the floor and Petrakis was yelping in pain.

Ives struck his second blow. In Petrakis' face.

The Greek went down.

It was ten minutes before Petrakis was able to tell Ives the full story, which he was quite willing to do since the evidence was plentiful and Petrakis knew the game was up.

That was after Petrakis had called the Pegasus à Go-Go bouncer to release Trixie. The blonde came on the phone and told Ives that she was all right.

"He was a lousy singer," Petrakis told Ives, "but he could act like a real hillbilly. Which he was. He'd get to a place like Nashville or Memphis or Mobile and he'd go to a coin dealer and put on his hillbilly act. His grampaw had died and left him a bunch of old Indian-head pennies. Were they worth anything? The dealer would look them over. There'd be fifty or sixty Indian-head pennies, none worth more'n a few cents apiece.

"But there'd be an 1856 Flying Eagle in the lot. The dealer would offer him a few dollars for the lot, but Boss would get cagey suddenly. He'd start to leave. The dealer wouldn't let him, naturally, and when Boss did leave he'd have maybe a thousand dollars in his pocket." Petrakis paused. "He paid me five hundred each for every one he sold. Two years ago he stopped buying coins from me."

"He went honest?" asked Ives.

"Honest, hell," snapped Petrakis. "He went in business for himself.

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He got himself a set of dies and a little furnace. He thought I didn't know about it, but coin collectors are a clannish lot. The word got around. He passed too many of the coins. He had expensive tastes—that trailer of his set him back plenty."

"But he played your club for two hundred fifty clams a week. Why?"

"Mister," said Petrakis grimly. "If you knew anything about show business you wouldn't ask that question. He was a ham and a ham's got to have an audience."

"As to that," said Ives, "you're a ham, yourself. It's what gave you away."

"What do you mean?"

"You're a Greek," said Ives, "which is fine, and you're an educated Greek, with a special love of Greek mythology. That's fine, too, but you couldn't keep it to yourself. You had to give your club a fancy Greek name—Pegasus. And when you committed murder you couldn't resist giving it a fancy Greek touch. Now, if they'll let you drink a cup of hemlock in San Quentin, instead of sniffing cyanide gas, I guess you'll die happy."

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a detective *SHORT NOVEL* by

PATRICK QUENTIN

Mrs. Laura Black, widow of an American diplomat, had staked everything on establishing a new means of livelihood for herself—Mrs. Black's Tours for Girls. And she had been extremely lucky. With her in Paris on her first European tour were four of the wealthiest American debutantes, and six other heiresses were to join the tour in Naples.

But what would happen if Laura Black, the very symbol of respectability, should become publicly involved in a mysterious theft, and after that, in a sordid and brutal murder? Disaster—the end of all her plans and hopes—disgrace—and perhaps worse, far worse . . .

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MRS. B.'s BLACK SHEEP

by PATRICK QUENTIN

LAURA BLACK SAT OPPOSITE PAUL Merton at the long night-club table, feeling happy and at peace with the world—a suitable mood for Easter Saturday in Paris. At first she had been dubious about bringing Mrs. Black's Tours for Girls—all four of them—to so Bohemian an establishment as Les Caves. But everything had been going swimmingly.

And, after all, the parents of her debutante charges were paying her enormous sums to have their daughters see all facets of Europe's culture. These cellar night clubs, where intense esthetic types danced and argued to the hot strains of American-style music, were as essential a part of their Paris education as Notre Dame or the Sacré Coeur.

The glorified chaperon in Laura Black, however, never completely relaxed. Now she peered at the dimly lit dancing couples to locate her girls. Kitty Cullen was dancing with an impeccable Groton-Harvard beau. She was all right. So was Anne Lomax, whose partner wore heavy-rimmed glasses and an open-necked corduroy

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shirt, and was obviously more interested in Sartre than in Sex. Holly Tyng was dancing with Nickie. That was all right, too. But where was Jennifer?

Jennifer Pleygel was the problem child of the Tour. Laura, craning her neck, made out Jennifer's creamy blonde hair. She was over by the orchestra, dancing swooningly close to Count Foligny and gazing up into his eyes with a nineteen-year-old's attempt at world-weary seductiveness.

"Drat!" thought Laura Black. "Jennifer's falling for that dreadful Count." She made a mental note to take immediate steps.

The handsome "Coco" Foligny, who had attached himself to the Tour after a chance horseback encounter last week in the Bois, almost certainly had a cynical marrying eye out for an American heiress. If Jennifer Pleygel developed an unsuitable foreign entanglement, her father, who controlled half of Chicago's meat-packing industry, both could and would slaughter Mrs. Black's Tour without a moment's qualm.

Paul Merton's amused voice broke into her reflections. "Counting your Black Sheep again, Laura?"

"I'm sorry, Paul." She turned on him her vivid, disarming smile. "It's just that the Tour's so new. I'm still in the bellwether stage."

Until yesterday afternoon at the stuffy Embassy tea she had hardly seen Paul Merton since that memorable night, over fifteen Easters ago, when she had told him she had decided to marry Howard Black, instead. Now that Howard was dead and she was an impoverished diplomat's widow, struggling to build a career for herself, the Washington past seemed idyllically free from care. Finding Paul, who represented the past, recently transferred here to Paris as an Embassy secretary, was the most pleasant thing that had happened to her.

He was smiling, too. "Bellwether or not, my dear, you have my unqualified admiration. If I had the responsibility of toting four giddy young American fortunes around Europe, I'd go mad."

"Oh, pooh. I can handle them. At least, I think I can." Laura, whose enterprise and bounce were normally indomitable, had one of her few moments of doubt. "I've got to, anyway. I've run shockingly into debt, launching this thing. It's succeed—or bust."

"Nothing will ever defeat you, Laura. You've always had the drive of a steam roller."

"Of all things to compare me to!"

"A most seductive steam roller, my dear. With a delightful chassis . . . Come on. Let's forget your little blessings for a while and dance."

But, as he spoke, Laura heard behind her the all-too-familiar: "Oh, Mrs. B.!"

Kitty Cullen, representing sev-

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eral million dollars' worth of Philadelphia real estate, was disentangling herself from the writhing mass of dancers, towing her Groton-Harvard boy friend behind her. She ran to the table and dropped dramatically into a chair at Laura's side.

"Oh, Mrs. B., the most terrible thing!" Beneath fluffy brown curls, her pretty, spoiled little face was flushed with emotion. "Someone's stolen my emerald bracelet."

"Nonsense, dear," snapped Laura, concealing anxiety. "You weren't wearing it tonight."

"I know, Mrs. B. But I was wearing it at the opera yesterday and the clasp broke, and I put it in my pocketbook. This pocketbook." Kitty brandished a white silk purse to emphasize her catastrophe. "I forgot all about it. But just now I wanted to powder my nose and I looked in the pocketbook and the bracelet's gone. It's stolen!"

Laura took Kitty's pocketbook and searched through it. The bracelet was definitely not there.

"Oh, Mrs. B., what shall we do?" Kitty was wailing above the reedy pipings of a hot clarinet. "Call the police? Search everybody?"

A few moments ago Laura had been worrying about the threat of Mr. Pleygel. Now, visions of an enraged Mr. Cullen in Philadelphia scudded through her mind, and for the second time she foresaw, Cassandralike, the downfall of Mrs. Black's Tour for Girls.

"Now, Kitty, dear, don't get excited. You're always mislaying things. You probably put it in a drawer at the hotel."

"I didn't, Mrs. B. I know I didn't. Oh, Mrs. B., this is a horrible place! You shouldn't have brought us here. You—"

"Now, Kitty," Laura checked the girl's hysteria. "There's only one sensible thing to do." She turned to the embarrassed Groton-Harvard admirer. "Andy will take you back to the hotel right now. Search. And search thoroughly. I know you'll find it. If you don't—well, we'll do something."

"But, Mrs. B.—"

"Run along, dear. And come straight back and report."

On the verge of tears Kitty permitted her boy friend to guide her toward the exit. As they disappeared through the dancers, Laura turned to Paul with a sigh.

"This is the end. Those emeralds are worth twenty thousand dollars if they're worth a cent. And she has to carry them around in her purse as if they were gumdrops! She's just as extravagant as she is careless, too. Already, she's bought half Paris. Really, these poor little rich girls."

"Don't worry yet, my dear. The Embassy handles half a dozen tourists a day who imagine they've lost something that shows up later."

At that moment the music stopped with an abrupt thump on

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the drum and the dancers started streaming back to their tables.

"Paul, don't tell the other girls."

"Of course not."

Nickie and Holly Tyng were the first to arrive at the table. Nickie Smith was the son of Laura's oldest friend, and he and Holly both came from Seattle. In fact, it had been Nickie's mother who had persuaded the fabulously wealthy lumber Tyngs to send Holly on the Tour, and Nickie, who had been between jobs in New York, had fortunately offered himself as Laura's chauffeur-assistant for the first trip.

During the war Nickie had married a French girl who had been killed in a bombing raid, and, matured by the tragedy, he was the ideal watchdog to have around four susceptible heiresses.

With his crewcut, his cheerful, snub-nosed face and easy swagger, Nickie looked absurdly like the Parisian conception of the typical young American.

"Well, Mrs. B., how do you like this Temple of Art?"

"It's divine, Mrs. B.," put in Holly. "I've been leered at by every man in the place." Boyish, redheaded, she looked around the shadowy cellar and exclaimed, "Oh, there's that girl who does the caricatures, the one we saw at that place the other night, remember? Let's get her over. I want her to do a sketch of Nickie."

In spite of Nickie's protests she waved at a thin girl with black bangs and a portfolio, who was squeezing her way between the tables. The rest of the party came back—the quiet Anne, who had shed her spectacled admirer, and the flamboyant Jennifer, clutching ecstatically at Count Foligny.

The itinerant caricaturist had sat down between Nickie and Holly. At Holly's insistence she had started to sketch Nickie, though he sat sulkily half turned away. In the general cheerfulness Laura's natural optimism reasserted itself. Obviously, Kitty would find the bracelet at the hotel and everything would be all right.

The music started again. Paul Merton asked Holly to dance.

The caricaturist, having finished her sketch of Nickie, got up from his side and came to the chair next to Laura. "Now I do Madame's picture, yes?"

Laura had noticed the girl around all the evening. She hadn't liked her. There was something raffish about her, and the black eyes under the black bangs were watching her now with a sort of sly appraisal.

Laura said, "No, thanks. Not for me."

"But Madame is so charming and I do so very good work. Look."

The girl sat down uninvited next to her and opened the portfolio. With a work-roughened hand, decorated by a plain gold ring, she propped up the sheaf of sketches,

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on top of which was the caricature of Nickie. It wasn't particularly well done. The few bold strokes had not caught his likeness at all.

"You see? This is my husband," announced the girl, and, letting the picture of Nickie drop, revealed a lean, distinguished male face with cold eyes. "He cheat me and desert me, leaving me to struggle for a living with my poor pencil. Please, Madame, for a favor!"

Disliking the synthetic whine in her voice, Laura refused again. But the girl did not rise.

"I can see from Madame's face that she has much power of personality. She is like me. She wants something—she gets it. From this a good picture is made."

Shamelessly she selected a fresh sheet of drawing paper and, adjusting it against a board, produced a black crayon.

"I told you . . ." began Laura.

Then she stopped, for the girl, instead of starting to draw, began to write on the sheet of paper. For an instant the sly, intelligent eyes flashed conspiratorially to Laura's. The words she was writing were:

If you want to know who stole that bracelet, come alone in 45 minutes to Hotel Mireille, Room 49. If I am not there, call the Police immediately.

Having written this message, the girl exclaimed, "Oh, for me the face is too subtle! I do not succeed." She handed the piece of paper to Laura. Calmly she arranged her drawings together, leaving only Nickie's, which Holly had bought.

She rose and, with a last, meaningful smile, disappeared through the shadowy swarm of dancers.

All the other members of the party had been dancing again for some time. For a moment Laura sat looking at the message, dumbfounded. After the first moment's shock she had never seriously believed that Kitty's bracelet had been stolen.

But now there seemed no doubt about it. Incredibly, the thin French caricaturist seemed to know who had stolen it and, even more incredibly, she seemed prepared to tell Laura the truth.

Suddenly conscious of the fact that anyone dancing past the table could have been reading the message over her shoulder, Laura folded the piece of paper and put it in her pocketbook. She would, of course, keep the appointment, which was in the neighborhood. The theft of the bracelet was a disaster, and any chance to regain it without a public scandal was more than worth investigating.

For a moment the words, *If I am not there, call the Police,* gave her pause. She wondered whether it would be wiser to take Paul Merton with her. Then she decided it would be more discreet at this juncture to keep the whole thing to herself.

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The next half hour was increasingly nerve-racking for Laura. She danced with Paul, and then with Jennifer's dark, lustrous Count, who made a suspiciously determined attempt to charm her.

When the time came, she excused herself. Fairly sure that no one of the group was paying any attention, she moved past the checkroom, where a girl had on sale some elaborately elegant Easter eggs, and climbed the grimy stairs which led to the street.

She found that the Hotel Mireille was typical of many obscure Parisian hotels, with its dilapidated Nineteenth Century façade and its glass doors which led to a prim little vestibule.

Laura opened the doors and went in. There was no one behind the desk. She crossed to a rickety stairway that wound upward. Room 49, the girl had said. Laura climbed the stairs to one deserted landing and then to a second.

On a door across from this second landing a chipped enamel disk said: 49. The door was ajar and dim light fanned out from the room inside. Laura tapped. There was no reply. She tapped again. After a few seconds' wait she pushed open the door and stepped inside.

Laura got a first blurred impression of a small untidy hotel bedroom. For a moment it seemed to be empty. Then, with a needle-sharp stab of alarm, she saw a leg protruding from behind the iron bed. It was a thin female leg in a shiny stocking, with a worn black ballet slipper half dislodged from the foot.

She ran forward, and saw the girl with the black bangs. She was lying sprawled on her back between the bed and the window. The sketches from her open portfolio were strewn grotesquely around her. Her bare, rough-knuckled hands, flung above her head, seemed to have been paralyzed in a futile clutch for safety. Blood slanted over her cheek.

Stunned to unnatural calm, Laura Black bent down at the girl's side. She saw, then, the shocking wound on the side of the head, where the skull had been crushed. And in that same instant she saw around the girl the scattered, jagged fragments of a wine bottle, which must have been used to deliver the blow.

The girl was dead. There was no doubt about that, even to Laura's untrained eye. There was no doubt, either, that she had been murdered.

For Laura, whose 36 years had been spent in a world of civilized order, this calamity was so far beyond the scope of her experience that for a moment it had no more reality to her than a surrealistic painting. Thoughts rushed at random through her mind. The girl had mentioned the police. She had expected danger connected with

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this talk about the stolen bracelet.

Had her murderer, then, been someone from the night club? Someone, perhaps, who had read the note over Laura's shoulder and hurried here to kill the girl before Laura arrived? But why? And why had the door been left ajar?

She became conscious of the remote pulsing of dance music, seeping through the half-open window. Suddenly everything was real. This was real blood; this was a real girl lying murdered in front of her.

Nausea creeping through her, she got up. As she did so she noticed a gleaming object, which was half concealed by the girl's skirt. She forced herself to stoop again and push the skirt aside.

Kitty's emerald bracelet lay there on the threadbare carpet.

Confused and frightened as she was, it seemed against every conceivable explanation that the bracelet could have been left lying there by the body. But it was true. She stretched out her hand, touched the bracelet gingerly, picked it up.

She stood, turned away from the body, gazing down at the bracelet in her hand. She was steady enough now to know that she would have to do something. But what?

Laura Black was a naturally law-abiding woman. The obvious thing was to call the police. But as she stood there, she realized exactly what going to the police would do to her Tour.

She had been immensely lucky in getting for the Tour some of the wealthiest debutantes in the States —these four and the other six who were to join the group later in Naples. If this first trip succeeded, she would have established a good means of livelihood, but she had managed to start the enterprise simply because she was Laura Black, a diplomat's widow, the very symbol of respectability.

All the girls were under age and had been entrusted to her by doting parents on the assumption that impeccable care would be taken of their persons and their reputations.

Earlier that evening the mere possibility that Kitty's bracelet might have been stolen had seemed enough to endanger the whole future of Laura's career. How infinitely more fatal it would be if she were headlined as discovering the murdered body of a girl who was mysteriously connected with the theft of one of her charges' jewelry.

It took Laura Black only a few seconds to find out that, in a desperate situation, she could be ruthless. With a clarity that almost frightened her she knew exactly what she was going to do.

The girl was dead, beyond the power of any medical aid. No one had seen Laura enter the hotel, or, for that matter, leave the night club. The bracelet was legitimately Kitty's.

Yes, there was only one course of

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action. It was antisocial; it presented infinite possibilities of danger; but it was her sole chance to rescue Mrs. Black's Tours from irretrievable ruin.

Laura put the bracelet into her pocketbook, moved to the door, and glanced out into the corridor. No one was in sight. She left the room, closing the door behind her.

Before she reached the vestibule, she craned over the stair banister. There was still no one visible at the desk. She crossed the foyer, and hurried out into the street.

In a few minutes she was back in the cellar night club. The music was still playing. In the dimness the dancers were working themselves up into a frenzy of movement which seemed to be their conception of American dancing.

She thanked heaven she had told no one about the girl or her appointment. All she had to do was to keep calm. Now that she had retrieved Kitty's bracelet there could surely be nothing to connect the murdered girl with Laura's party, even when the police discovered the body.

Ironically, the shock of the past minutes, which still partially numbed her, made it fairly easy for her to seem composed. She squeezed her way toward her own table, hoping that the rest of her party would be dancing. But Paul Merton was sitting there alone.

When he saw her, he jumped up. "Laura, where have you been? I've searched all over."

"I went out for a breath of air. It was stuffy." . . . Would that do?

He showed no signs of noticing anything odd about her. He said, "Kitty is back. Don't get panicky, my dear, but she didn't find the bracelet."

"She didn't?" Try to make the surprise and anxiety convincing. "Oh, Paul, how depressing!"

"She's raising quite a row. I made her dance to keep her quiet for a while."

Laura noticed then that Kitty's white silk purse was on the table with several others. Casually she dropped her own pocketbook close to it, and then managed to pick up the two, with her own on top, concealing Kitty's from Paul. It was so dark that she was almost sure he had noticed nothing. Murmuring something about powdering her nose, she left him and made her way to the washroom.

An old cronish attendant nodded at the door; otherwise the little room was empty. Laura opened Kitty's purse and fingered the heavy silk lining. It was quite loose. With a nail file she made a small slit at the seam, widened it, and then taking the bracelet from her own pocketbook, pushed it down under the lining.

She returned quickly to the table and slipped Kitty's purse back in its original position.

As she was sitting down next to

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Paul, Kitty danced into view with her boy friend. She saw Laura and ran to the table, announcing breathlessly, "It isn't there, Mrs. B. We searched everywhere."

"You're sure?"

"Of course, I am! It's stolen. I told you it was."

The music had stopped again and all the others were coming back to the table. Count Foligny, with Jennifer on his arm, asked sharply, "Stolen, Mees Kitty? What is stolen?"

"My bracelet. My emerald bracelet."

The group crowded around in consternation.

"Kitty, are you sure?" Jennifer asked.

"Why does everyone keep asking if I'm sure?" Kitty's little round blue eyes darted suspiciously from one face to the other. "Someone took it. It was in my purse."

"If it was in your purse," Laura said quietly, "it's probably still there."

"Of course, it isn't there. I looked. You looked, too."

"But we were excited. Maybe it slipped down in the lining or something. Look again."

Sulkily Kitty picked up the purse and opened it. She exclaimed triumphantly, "It's not here, I told you so. I—" She broke off, bumbled, and then, very red, stammered, "Wait a minute. There *is* something in the lining."

In a few seconds she had pulled out the bracelet. Everyone laughed and started to tease her. She protested that she was sure the bracelet had not been there before, but no one believed her.

No one ever would, reflected Laura, feeling an enormous welling up of relief. Whatever might happen later on, she had got away with the first step. It was amazing how easy it had been. To make it more convincing, she would read Kitty a lecture on the proper care of personal property later.

The supposed loss of the bracelet and its recovery had brought a festive mood to the table. The four girls were now extolling Laura's efficiency with affectionate mockery and plying Paul Merton with questions about her past.

"You've known her all her life, Mr. Merton. Was Mrs. B. always so flawless? Didn't she ever have feet of clay?"

Paul glanced slyly at Laura across the table. "As a matter of fact, when I first met her, her feet were clay right up to the knees. She must have been nine, going on ten. Someone brought her to an Easter party of mine in Washington. I was proudly entertaining my guests with sleight of hand tricks, but Mrs. B. went me one better. When she left, I noticed a very peculiar bump under her blouse. Later I discovered that a beautiful little Easter egg, all done up in gold tinfoil, which my uncle had given me, had disappeared."

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"And it is Madame Black who stole it?" asked Count Foligny, with a smile.

"I was always too polite to ask her."

All the girls swung round to Laura. "Did you, Mrs. B? Did you swipe it?"

Laura, who had forgotten the incident decades ago, now recalled it, and flushed. "I'm afraid I did. I ate it in bed, I remember. It was full of gooey cherry syrup. I was sick all night."

She rose. "With which little homily on the perils of theft and gluttony, I'll break up the party. Time to go, girls."

The girls protested automatically, but soon Laura got them under way. As they dispersed from the table, Paul lingered at her side.

"Laura, it's been most refreshing to see you again and, believe it or not, I'm quite in love with your Black Sheep."

Looking at him, Laura forgot for a moment the troubles of the evening. The years, she thought, had treated him romantically. The rather gangling youth of the past had fined down into a distinguished diplomat with just the right greyhound look.

"I'm so glad, Paul."

"A bachelor's life in Paris is notoriously gay and wicked. But to tell you the truth, I've found it rather lonely so far. Mind if I call you tomorrow? It's Easter Sunday, you know."

"Of course I don't mind."

He was watching her curiously. "I'm glad the bracelet was a false alarm. There's nothing wrong, is there?"

"Wrong?"

"You still look a bit—well, distraught."

Laura tried to smile brightly. "Can steam rollers look distraught?"

He smiled, too. "I suppose they can't." He took her hand. "Well, steam on, my dear. And all the luck in the world to Mrs. Black's Tour."

He went with her to the street, where Nickie had parked the Tour's hired limousine at the curb. Nickie and all the girls except Jennifer were there.

Laura asked, "Where's Jennifer?"

"She's not in the club," said Nickie. "I've just looked."

Holly said, "She's probably snuck off with her Count."

Normally, this would have been a problem to take seriously, but that night Laura did not feel up to coping with it. "Never mind, Nickie. Let's get back to the hotel."

They left Paul at the curb.

Back in the hotel suite Nickie and the three girls separated, to go straight to their rooms. Laura went to Kitty's room. Feeling rather hypocritical, she gave a stern little lecture about carelessness.

Kitty pouted. "The silly old

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bracelet isn't as valuable as all that."

"Emeralds not valuable?"

"Oh, they're not *real emeralds*. Daddy wouldn't let me bring the real ones. He said it wouldn't be safe. He had copies made."

Laura stared. "You never told me."

"I didn't want people to know. Copies are so vulgar. But Daddy insisted. Mrs. B., you won't tell anyone, will you? Promise."

"All right, dear."

Kitty looked naïve and pleading. "If they had been real, I'd never have been so careless. So it isn't terribly bad of me, is it?"

Laura managed to say, "I guess it isn't. But please in future be more organized. Good night."

"Good night, Mrs. B."

Laura went back to the living room of the suite. She felt very shaky now. She sat down, trying to straighten some of the confusion in her mind. So the bracelet had been merely an imitation. How did that affect the situation? What *was* the situation, anyway?

The events of this action-crammed evening had left her no time to think. The bracelet had been lying in Kitty's purse ever since its clasp had broken at the opera the night before. It could have been stolen at Les Caves, but it could also have been stolen at any time during the day.

But by whom? The dead girl herself? If so, why would she have offered to tell Laura who had stolen it? Probably some petty left-Bank crook had taken it at the night club. The dead girl had witnessed the theft. Hoping to get a reward from Laura, she had planned to expose it. The thief had guessed her intention, followed her to the hotel, and murdered her.

Yes, that was probably what had happened.

But why, then, had the bracelet been in the girl's possession? And, since it was only a cheap imitation . . .

These thoughts collided with one another in her mind and merged into a harrowing image of the nameless girl lying brutally murdered in her pathetic hotel room. Laura felt the delayed shock coming, and, as a counterirritant, forced herself to think about Jennifer Pleygel and the Count.

Compared to the murder, Jennifer's childish lack of resistance to male flattery was an infinitely minor problem, but it could not be lightly dismissed. Mr. Pleygel was so convinced that his "little" Jennifer would become the victim of "one of those foreign gigolos," that he had denied her even pocket money. Whenever she needed anything, even a toothbrush, she had to come to Laura for the cash.

Exhausted as she was, Laura tried to frame a suitable speech of reproof for Jennifer. But her normal aplomb in matters of this sort seemed to have deserted her. The

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clock on the hotel mantel showed nearly three before there was a furtive scratching at the lock and Jennifer tiptoed into the living room.

When she saw Laura, she started guiltily. "Oh, are you still up?"

"Does that surprise you, dear? After all, I'm supposed to be a chaperon, and when you go creeping off with indiscriminate noblemen—"

"Indiscriminate!" Jennifer gave an indignant gasp. "How can you say that about Coco! Except for that once when I made him dance with you, he danced every dance with me. He never dates French girls. They bore him. He said so. And he said I was the most understanding, sensitive girl he'd ever met. He's a sophisticated, charming, gentle—"

"Bum," put in Laura coldly. "Jennifer, dear, it's late and I'm too tired for drama. Let's be simple about this thing. I know nothing about Count Foligny, but I do know that Europe's spread with his type, thick as peanut butter. They love pretty American girls, and they love their pretty American bankrolls even more. Go around with Coco if he amuses you —I'm not stuffy enough to stop that—but, for mercy's sake, don't start getting ideas that you're the most sensitive girl he's ever met."

"Why, Mrs. B., of all the dreadful, cynical remarks!"

"I'm sorry, dear. I said, no drama. Now, run along to bed."

Round-eyed with outrage, Jennifer flounced from the room. Laura sighed. A little tact could have put across the same advice without antagonizing the girl. She had bungled the whole thing.

But she was too spent to worry out any more problems that night. In a few minutes she was in bed, drifting into uneasy sleep.

When she awoke the next morning it was after ten. Her first drowsy reaction was self-reproach at having slept so late. At noon she was to take the girls to Notre Dame for Easter Mass. Then she remembered the events of the night before and came suddenly awake.

She called the desk, to order breakfast and all the morning papers. When the papers came, she searched them thoroughly. She had somehow expected the death of the caricaturist to scream from the headlines. But she couldn't find it mentioned, even briefly in an inside column.

Had the body not yet been discovered? Or had the death of so obscure and shady a character not seemed worth reporting?

In the encouraging light of morning it seemed to her that she had behaved last night, if unethically, at least as sensibly as could have been expected in the circumstances. The episode seemed closed.

There was a tap on the bedroom door, and Anne Lomax came in. Of all her four charges, Anne, with

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her shy intelligence and odd, interesting face, was Laura's favorite. This was mostly because the girl needed affection, and whenever affection was needed by a young person, Laura, who was a frustrated mother, rushed to provide it.

Today Anne was wearing a neat white suit and, having discarded her heavy, unbecoming glasses, looked fresh and pretty. "Hello, Mrs. B. I've come to say Happy Easter. The others are still hurtling around the apartment getting ready. But I'm all set for church, like a good girl."

She sat down on the edge of the bed and smiled. Laura made a point of being especially kind to Anne because the girl had just come out of a disastrous love affair. The man had been a teller in one of her father's St. Louis banks, and he had turned out to be married and the father of three children.

When the romance reached its inevitable sordid collapse Anne had been threatened with a nervous breakdown. The doctors had recommended sending her to a psychiatric hospital, but Laura herself had persuaded Anne's parents that an extended European trip would be a less drastic and much pleasanter cure.

She flattered herself now that she had been justified. She knew Anne still had moods of depression, but ever since she'd reached Paris the girl had been far more cheerful and sure of herself.

"Well, Anne dear, did you enjoy yourself last night?"

"Oh, yes, Mrs. B. It was fun." Anne grabbed impulsively for her hand. "I can't tell you how grateful I am—for everything."

"Oh, nonsense."

"It isn't nonsense, Mrs. B. If it hadn't been for you—"

She broke off as Nickie came in, uncharacteristically spruced up in a dark-blue suit. "Happy Easter, everyone. Sorry I'm late, Mrs. B. I had a little trouble with the limousine."

Laura remembered, then, that she had arranged to go over the week's accounts with Nickie that morning. She sent Anne away.

"Get the book, Nickie," she said. "It's over there on the desk."

Nickie brought the account book and a pile of bills, paid and unpaid. They were struggling with figures when a loud rat-a-tat sounded at the door, and Holly Tyng, clad in a fluffy dressing gown, appeared. She was carrying a square white box tied with a rakish blue ribbon.

"Happy Easter, Mrs. B. This must have been brought by special messenger. I just found it in the hall." She put the box down on a small table. "I've got to hand it to you, Mrs. B.! You older girls can certainly make your beaus come across. I'd adore to know what you've chiseled. But if I don't catch up with my morning, I'll never make Notre Dame."

She grinned at them both and

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left. Laura untied the ribbon and took the lid off the box. She pulled out soft white tissue paper and revealed a charming little Easter egg, wrapped in gold tinfoil and lying in an exquisite imitation bird's nest of moss and straw.

Beaming, Laura lifted the nest out. A silver band was wrapped around the egg. On it was written the word: *"Cerise."*

"Cherry!" she translated. "Paul even remembered the flavor!"

She searched in the box for a card, but there was none. A card would have been unnecessary, anyway. How sweet of Paul Merton to have turned back the years like this. He must have bought the egg last night at Les Caves.

Laura felt like a little girl again with a suspicious bulge in her middy blouse. Dear Paul!

She picked the egg out of the nest. It was rather sticky. "Drat, it's broken! Never mind. That's a good excuse for eating it now."

As she unwrapped the tinfoil, some of the thin filling smeared her fingers, and she saw that the chocolate covering was indeed cracked. She dropped the egg onto a small dish and cut it into little segments. She held out the dish to Nickie. "Do have some."

Nickie took a small piece. So did Laura. As she lifted the candy to her mouth, a pungent odor trailed up from it to her nostrils. It wasn't the odor of cherry filling. It was much sharper.

Nickie was just about to bite into his piece of egg when she called out sharply, "No, Nickie! Stop! Don't eat it!" She moved to prevent him so swiftly that she upset box and dish.

Nickie gazed at her, holding the candy in mid-air. "Mrs. B., what on earth—?"

"It's supposed to be cherry, but it doesn't smell like cherry. Nickie, what does it smell like to you?"

The boy sniffed at the piece of chocolate egg in bewilderment. "Smells more like almonds, I'd say. Only sharper."

Laura was terribly conscious now of that pungent odor of almonds. Cyanide. Wasn't that the poison that smelled like almonds? Panic, like a cold snake, curled upward through her.

Nickie gave an incredulous laugh. "For heaven's sake, Mrs. B.! Just because it smells of almonds, you don't imagine someone's trying to poison you with prussic acid, do you?"

Gingerly he nibbled at his portion, and then, with a grunt of disgust, spat it out. "Good lord, it does taste bitter. There is something wrong with it. Mrs. B., what is all this?"

What was it, indeed? All the horrors of last night had come tumbling back. But now there was a new twist which made everything far, far worse. If this Easter egg was poisoned, then surely it had been sent to her by the murderer.

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Who else could have a motive for trying to kill her? And if it was sent by the murderer, then the murderer could only be one of the people who had heard Paul's foolish anecdote about the children's Easter party.

The only people who had heard it were the people at their own table last night—the four girls, Nickie, and Count Foligny.

Shakily she said, "Nickie, I'm going to call Paul to ask whether he sent it or not. Go and find out if any of the girls did. But don't let them suspect anything's wrong."

As Nickie hurried obediently off, Laura stared down at the bits of chocolate egg that had fallen to the floor. She collected them carefully, and set the dish back on the table. The murderer had almost certainly known she was going to that girl's hotel room. Hadn't he even left the door ajar for her?

And, of course, when Kitty "rediscovered" the bracelet in her purse, he would have known that only Laura could have put it there.

The frightening implications were legion. Trying to keep steady, she called Paul's apartment.

His cheerful voice said, "Happy Easter, Laura. I was just going to call you."

"Paul, this is going to sound odd, but did you send me an Easter egg?"

"An Easter egg? Certainly not. It's you who owe me one."

"You—you didn't send it, then?"

"No." His voice sounded anxious. "Laura, there *is* something wrong."

She felt a sudden need for his practical common sense. "You couldn't come around, could you?" She glanced at her watch. "No, there's no time. I've got to take the girls to High Mass at Notre Dame. Could you meet us there? Outside the cathedral in an hour?"

"Of course. But what is it?"

"I'll tell you then."

She let the receiver drop back on its stand. Her eyes returned in fascination to the remains of the Easter egg. Suppose she faced this terrible thing. Suppose she admitted to herself that the murderer was one of her own little circle. Why?

Why had the girl been killed? And why now had her own murder been attempted? Something about the bracelet, of course. Something she knew that made her a menace. But what?

Nickie came back into the room "It wasn't any of the girls."

"It wasn't Paul, either.

He sat down on the bed, watching her anxiously. "Then the egg may really be poisoned?"

"Oh, yes, it's poisoned all right."

"But why are you so sure?"

"There's a reason, Nickie. I don't think I'd better tell you yet. But there's a reason."

"Then what are you going to do? Call the police?"

"And have the Tour wrecked?"

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Indignation helped to restore Laura's assurance. "Certainly not."

"But if someone's trying to poison you, you can't stick around Paris. I can understand why you don't want any scandal hitting the Tour. But if this is serious, Mrs. B., we'd better get out of town."

That was it, of course. They'd planned to go to Venice in a few days, anyway.

"Yes, Nickie. That's what we'd better do. We'll leave for Venice tomorrow."

"Sure. But, Mrs. B., you've got to tell me what's wrong."

She smiled at him. "Nickie, dear, you're a great comfort. I'll tell you, later on. Not now. It's all got to be straighter in my mind . . . Now run along and wire the hotel in Venice, please."

When she was alone, Laura put the dish with the remains of the Easter egg into the box and locked it into a drawer of her highboy. As she dressed quickly, she felt a little calmer, because a new idea had come which diminished some of the horror.

It really wasn't necessary to assume that the murderer was one of her group, after all. The night club had been crowded when Paul had told his anecdote. The murderer might easily have been sitting at a nearby table and overheard it.

That was it, of course. It had to be. Once she had escaped from Paris, she and the Tour would be safe.

Laura Black put on an outrageously frivolous Easter bonnet and smiled at her reflection in the mirror.

"Courage, Mrs. B.," she told it.

Paul Merton was waiting outside Notre Dame. While the majestic Easter Mass had taken place, Laura definitely decided to tell him everything. Even though she had not seen him for years, he was one of her oldest friends; he had Embassy contacts and he was completely to be trusted.

When the service was over, she sent the girls back to the hotel with Nickie in the limousine and strolled with Paul through the crisp sunshine along the Seine, past the austere magnificence of the Louvre. In the Tuileries gardens they found a seat under a chestnut tree afoam with creamy white blossoms.

She told Paul all that had happened. By the time she had finished, his face was grave.

"You took a terrible risk, walking out on that dead girl."

"I know it. But I had to."

"Under your particular circumstances I can understand, but that doesn't make it any less dangerous for you. Laura, you're right, and I speak as a man and an Embassy official. The best thing is to get yourself and your Black Sheep out of Paris as soon as possible."

"I'm going to. I've already broken it to the girls, in the car going to Notre Dame. I explained that

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if we left for Venice tomorrow we'd have time for a quick visit to Capri before the other girls arrive at Naples." She turned to him urgently. "But you do think I'm right, don't you? It can't possibly be anyone on the Tour."

"It probably isn't," said Paul soberly. "But you can't afford to abandon the idea completely. Let's try and be sensible about this. It all began as a theft. Could any one of your party have had any motive for stealing that bracelet?"

The idea of one of her millionaire charges stealing a bracelet seemed preposterous. But, as Laura reviewed the four girls, she remembered something which she had forgotten until that moment: before they left New York, Mrs. Lomax, who had accompanied Anne from St. Louis, had told Laura the symptoms of Anne's incipient breakdown. One of the things that had first made them realize she was sick had been a pathetic episode in which she had been caught pilfering a silver spoon from a restaurant. It was a mild form of kleptomania which, the doctors had said, sometimes accompanied a depressive neurosis.

The memory brought Laura a sudden shiver of alarm. But she fought against it. Anne was obviously so very much better. It was cruel even to entertain the thought that she could have stolen, murdered . . .

Paul's voice broke into her reflections. "What about Jennifer? You tell me her father keeps her short of cash. What if she needed money for some reason, stole the bracelet, thinking it was real, tried to sell it on the black market through that girl, and got herself blackmailed?"

The improbable thought came of Jennifer stealing the bracelet to elope with Count Foligny. Instantly Laura suppressed it. Paul was being too logical. Of course it wasn't one of her girls. That was her decision and she was going to stick by it.

She rose from the green-painted seat. "Well, let's get back to the hotel. I want you to see the Easter egg." She tried to sound light. "And if it is one of the group, let's hope it's Count Foligny. At least, we'll be rid of him tomorrow."

But she wasn't rid of the Count yet. When they reached the hotel they found Coco Foligny in the living room of the suite, sitting on a love seat with Jennifer. He rose and bowed elaborately.

"Good morning, Madame." He kissed her hand and produced a large elegant package. "I come to wish your charming charges a Happy Easter. And for you, Madame, who are as clever at discovering jewels as you are at stealing Easter eggs, I bring this token of my admiration. A little egg."

Laura accepted the package with formal politeness and, excusing herself, took Paul to her own room.

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"For pity's sake," she said, "how many Easter eggs do I get today?"

She threw the package down on the bed, unlocked the drawer where she had left the remains of the suspect egg, and took the dish out of the box. The pungent odor of almonds still trailed up from the melting candy.

While Paul sniffed at it, she asked, "It is cyanide, isn't it?"

"We can't be sure without analysis. But it certainly smells like it." Abruptly he turned to her. "Laura, let me come to Venice with you."

Laura felt uncharacteristically weak and feminine. It seemed suddenly unbearable to have to lose his protective presence. But common sense prevailed.

"No, Paul. I'm Caesar's wife—above reproach—or I'm a dead bunny. How would it look to the girls if I started to travel around every place with one man? No. I've got Nickie. I'll be all right."

He looked awkward and young now, oddly reminiscent of the earnest young attaché to whom she'd said "No" once before, more than —heavens, was it that long?—more than fifteen years ago.

"Very well, Laura. I'll stay here. But I'll get the egg analyzed, and I'll make discreet inquiries through the Embassy about the dead girl. If by any chance the police start to link things with you, I think I'll be able to squash it. But I'll let you know what I find out."

"Thank you, Paul. So much."

"But, Laura, promise me one thing."

"Of course."

He took both her hands and held them. "Laura, be very, very careful. Now that I've found you again, I don't want to lose you."

Laura Black, in a cheerful yellow slicker, came out of the American Express office in Venice with a fat packet of mail. The girls had just left her to go about their various businesses, and she felt it would be pleasant to read her letters over a cup of coffee.

She moved down the narrow picturesque alley and out through an arch into the bizarre splendors of the Piazza San Marco, where the legendary pigeons swirled and swooped before the domes of the Basilica and the great looming bell tower. She crossed the square to a restaurant and, throwing aside caloric caution, ordered her coffee with that glorious Italian whipped cream.

Why not? This was their last day in Venice before they left for Capri. A whole week had passed since Paris without any unnerving incident. That was reason enough to celebrate.

She and Paul had confided everything in Nickie before they left Paris, and they had both been constantly on guard. But it was obvious now that Laura had been right. The Paris episode, whatever it had been about, had been completely

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independent of the Tour. It was a nightmare that was safely in the past.

It was pleasant to have nothing more to worry about than the trivialities of daily living. That little shoemaker to whom she had just taken her evening slippers had promised to mend them by 6:30, which meant she would be able to wear her Paris evening gown for the farewell party she had planned that night at the Lido.

The girls were dutifully absorbing culture and seemed to be happy. Kitty had run into a second equally impeccable Groton-Harvard admirer from Philadelphia; even Anne, wary of males after her tragic experience, had interesting friends; Jennifer, thank heaven, was so swamped with beaus, culled from the American tourist invasion, that she appeared completely to have forgotten Coco Foligny.

Laura sipped her coffee through the thick, foamy cream, and inspected her mail for a letter from Paul.

There was one. Paul wrote that the body of the dead girl had been discovered and, through the Embassy, he had obtained all the information that was at present to hand.

The girl's name had been Yvonne Delauny. It was believed that she had been married several years ago, but she had not been living with her husband. For some time she had been under suspicion of being connected with a gang of jewel thieves, and it was more than probable that she had been an active collaborationist with the Germans during the War.

Paul assured Laura that the police were dealing with the case as just another crook killing, and that there seemed no chance that her Tour would be involved.

The final paragraph was even more encouraging:

"I leave the best news till last. I managed to have the Easter egg analyzed discreetly. It was *not* poisoned with cyanide. It had, however, been doctored with oil of bitter almonds to make you *think* it was poisoned.

"Obviously, my dear, it was sent to scare you away from Paris—probably by the jewel thieves! I don't begin to know what it was all about and, frankly, I don't much care, because I think we can all relax now. Have a good time. I'm trying to, but Paris seems dreary since you left."

Laura reread the letter happily and then, putting it down, started on the others. Most of them dealt with future reservations and other technicalities of the Tour. The last one came from Holly's mother in Seattle. Laura had never met Mrs. Tyng in person, but Nickie's mother had called her a gorgon, and several previous letters had borne this opinion out.

Laura slit the envelope, and read, in a formidable, flourishing hand: "Dear Mrs. Black:

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"I am horrified! I have only this moment heard that Claire Smith's son, Nickie, is employed as chauffeur on your Tour. I can only consider this a gross piece of deception. I have nothing against the Smiths personally. However, I have told Holly how I feel about the sly relationship which exists between her and Nickie. It is an unwholesome association, which keeps my daughter from making more suitable contacts. In fact, it was largely to break it that I sent Holly on your Tour. You can imagine . . ."

With a sinking heart Laura read Mrs. Tyng's invective up to its furious climax: ". . . and so, unless I can have your immediate assurance that Nickie Smith has been dismissed from your employ, I shall insist upon Holly's return to the United States.

"Truly yours,
"Maude Tyng."

Laura felt baffled and indignant. Mrs. Tyng was a gorgon, all right, but could Holly and Nickie have been deceiving them all?

She looked back over the past weeks. She had always felt completely sure of Nickie. And Holly, of all the girls, had seemed the sensible forthright one who had needed no supervision nor worry.

But here in Venice, where there was no chauffeuring to be done, the two of them had been off alone almost every day, and since Laura had known they were old friends, she hadn't given it a second thought.

She wondered how to cope with this new onslaught. To have to give up Nickie would be a disaster. And as for sending Holly home, it would be most embarrassing at this early stage of the Tour's financial stability to have to refund the greater part of the Tyng money.

Something had to be done, and it might as well be done quickly. Nickie and Holly had just left her to take in the view from the Basilica roof. They were probably still there.

She paid her check, put on her yellow slicker, and hurried through the square toward the glittering façade of the Basilica.

Holly and Nickie were not in the main body of the church. Laura climbed steep, dark steps and found herself in a strange aerial world under the flashing gold of the central dome. Then an open doorway showed daylight, and the four rampant horses which decorated the main façade.

She hurried out of the door onto a flat terrace. Below stretched the magnificent rectangle of the Piazza. Holly and Nickie were standing close together by one of the horses. When they saw her they moved apart.

"Why, look who's here." Holly tossed back her thick red hair and grinned. "Giving yourself an individual Tour, Mrs. B.?"

Nickie's crewcut blond head was still bent in apparent concentration over the illustrated pamphlet in his hand.

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Laura, hating the whole situation, said, "I've just had a letter from your mother, Holly."

Nickie glanced up. Holly shrugged with unconvincing nonchalance. "You poor darling, that's enough to blight anyone's day."

"Holly, why didn't you tell your mother that Nickie was coming on this trip? And why didn't you both tell me she doesn't want you to be together?"

Nickie began a flustered: "Mrs. B.—"

"That's two questions, Mrs. B.," cut in Holly. "We didn't tell Mother that Nickie was coming because it was none of her business. We didn't tell you because—"

"Because it was none of mine?"

"No, Mrs. B. It's not that. Oh, you've got to know Mother to understand. I'm nearly twenty-one. In a few months I'll be my own boss, but Mother treats me like a babe in arms. Just because Nickie's people are poor, and he's been married, she imagines he's after our money. It's ridiculous and revolting. This trip was a wonderful break for Nickie, and we knew Mother would scream her head off if she knew."

"That isn't the point," cut in Laura. "She says she sent you on the Tour deliberately to break up your relationship with Nickie. She calls it unwholesome and sly."

Nickie's face flushed. "That's a dirty lie."

"Nickie, don't be difficult—please." Holly turned back to Laura. "What does she want you to do?"

"Dismiss Nickie or send you home."

For a moment Holly stood in silence. She said suddenly, "Maybe we have been sly, Mrs. B. What we did seemed right at the time, but now I think we should tell you the truth."

Nickie said warningly, "Holly, don't—"

"We can trust Mrs. B., Nickie. I know it." With her chin thrust forward, Holly looked at Laura from clear, candid eyes. "Nickie and I are married. We were married secretly in Nevada before we came on the Tour."

Laura was taken completely by surprise. "Married!"

"Oh, we hated to be secret about it, but, Mother being Mother, it was the only way. Mother tried to break it up by sending me on the Tour. I couldn't bear to be separated from Nickie that long, so we thought out this idea of Nickie's applying for the job. It'll be all right. I swear it. It's only Mother who's snobbish about him. Daddy's sweet. He's devoted to Nickie. Next month, after I'm twenty-one, we're going to write to him and tell him everything. He'll understand, I know, and he'll bring Mother around."

Laura had no ready answer. She glanced at Nickie.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. B.," he said. "We should have told you. Holly's right." He smiled apprehensively. "What are you going to do?"

As usual with Laura, her affection

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for young people was getting the better of what were probably her own interests.

"Fool that I am," she said, "I'm probably going to give you my blessing."

"Oh, Mrs. B.—"

"But," cut in Laura sternly, "I can't approve of the secrecy. You must write to your father right away. I'll pay no attention to your mother's letter until you get his reply."

Holly ran to her and kissed her exuberantly. "Oh, thank you, Mrs. B.!"

"And," added Laura, "for mercy's sake be discreet, and don't let the other girls suspect anything until it's settled."

As they climbed down again to the Piazza, Laura told Nickie about Paul's good news.

"Probably the girl's husband killed her," she said. "She showed me his portrait and he looks distinguished enough to be a murderer. It's a great relief, isn't it?"

"It certainly is." Nickie put his hand on her shoulder. "Mrs. B., you've been perfectly swell about us."

Laura smiled, rather ruefully. "Well, you've stuck by me. The least I can do is to stick by you."

In the square they ran into Anne and Kitty returning from a gondola trip to San Maria della Salute. Laura left Nickie and Holly with them and started back to the hotel to tackle her mail.

She took a roundabout route and arrived on a little wharf on the bank of the Grand Canal. For a moment she paused to glance at the colorful bustle of gondolas and barges gliding past the old palaces. The fussy little steam ferry was approaching the jetty, belching black smoke. She watched the drama and confusion of its landing and was just about to turn back toward the hotel when she stopped dead.

Leading the throng of passengers off the boat, exquisitely dressed, and with a suitcase in his hand, was Count Coco Foligny.

He saw her immediately, and his handsome face broke into a smile that seemed to hold a shadow of malicious amusement. "So you come to welcome me to Venice, Madame. How very kind. And how is our adorable Mees Jennifer?"

Laura, immediately on her guard, matched his irony with a poisonous sweetness. "Jennifer's fine. She's having a wonderful time. So many beaus of her own age. I hope she'll remember you."

"At least, she had not forgotten me yesterday." Cocking a quizzical eyebrow, the Count produced a telegram from his pocket. "She sends me a wire, saying: 'Dear Coco, I am so bored. Come quick.'"

Jolted out of politeness, Laura gasped, "She—she can't have been such a fool."

"Ah, you call it foolish." Coco smiled. "I call it charming. And I felt it would be most ungallant to disappoint so constant a young

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lady." He bowed. "You will excuse me now? I must go to the hotel."

He moved past her and started up the alley toward the hotel. Laura, jarred but not overthrown, followed without hesitation, passed him at the desk in the lobby, and went straight to Jennifer's room. She found the girl on a chaise longue, painting her toenails a noisy magenta.

"Jennifer Pleygel," she announced, "Count Foligny is here!"

Jennifer shook the blonde hair out of her eyes and looked up with feigned indifference. "He is? That's nice."

"What do you mean it's nice? Jennifer, why on earth did you send him that telegram? I've warned you that Count Foligny is a fortune hunter. If you haven't enough sense—"

"You're always talking about sense. Mrs. B., weren't you *ever* young?"

Laura flushed. "I'm not exactly decrepit yet, and it's offensive of you to suggest it."

"Well, it's offensive, Mrs. B., to butt in on other people's lives." Jennifer was staring with cold defiance.

"But your parents!"

"I don't care this"—Jennifer snapped dramatic fingers—"for my parents. Okay, tell Daddy, and see if I care. You may all of you have my money tied up, but I'm not a slave. I can see my friends when I want to, and, right now, I want to see Coco." She crossed her long bare legs. "So, unless you expect me to go to him with five unpainted toenails—"

It was hopeless to drag on the futile battle. Inwardly boiling, Laura withdrew to her own room.

What could she do? She had no legal authority over Jennifer. Perhaps the best thing was to change her tune for a while. If she could remember to be clever instead of losing her temper, she ought to be able to outwit the Count some way or other.

Yes, that was the thing to do. She would go all out and invite Coco to escort Jennifer to the dance that evening. She would think of something.

Laura Black, dressed in the evening gown which had been her major Parisian extravagance, sat at her mirror fussing with her hair. Outside, a typical Venetian drizzle thickened the early twilight. This was annoying, but only mildly so, as she had arranged for covered launches to take the party to the Lido.

After an uneventful afternoon, her natural resilience had reasserted itself. She had made a false peace with the Count and invited him on the party, trusting to the inspiration of the moment to open Jennifer's eyes about him. Everything seemed pretty well under control.

She rose from the mirror, started toward the closet for her matching evening slippers, and then remembered with annoyance that she had

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forgotten to pick them up from the shoemaker. Heavens! The man had said 6:30, and it was almost that now. He would be closing his shop any minute. There was no time to change back into street clothes.

She pushed her feet into some old ballet slippers and reached into the closet for her yellow-hooded slicker.

As she brought it out, the maid came in to close the shutters; and, simultaneously, the phone rang. Tossing the slicker on the bed, Laura answered the phone. Her heart jumped when she heard Paul Merton's voice.

"Why, Paul, where on earth are you?"

"Right here in Venice. I hope you don't mind."

"Mind? I'm overjoyed. Wait just a minute."

The slippers had to be picked up now or never. The shop was not far. The maid was obliging and had been generously tipped. Laura made her request in Italian and the maid beamed her understanding and consent.

"And, Rosa." She pointed to the slicker. "Take that. It's raining."

Rosa picked up the yellow slicker, put it on, and, giggling, lifted the peaked hood over her hair.

"I'm so sorry, Paul," said Laura into the phone as the maid slipped out of the room. "Now we can talk properly. When did you arrive?"

"About five minutes ago. I've been keeping an eye on our Count. When he decided to fly to Venice, I thought maybe I should come along, too." He laughed. "At least, that's the story I planned to tell you. Have you seen him, by the way?"

"Yes, he's here at the hotel. Laura added, "Look, Paul, we're just going over to the Lido for a farewell dinner. It'll be rather juvenile, but could you bear it?"

"I'd be delighted."

Laura put down the receiver, smiling to herself. It was ludicrous to be so happy because Paul had followed her to Venice, when she had emphatically asked him not to. But, ludicrous or not, it was an extremely pleasant sensation.

Never been young, indeed! Jennifer's words still piqued her.

"It's a black lie," thought Laura.

She waited twenty minutes for Rosa to come back with the slippers, and then lost her patience. Rosa had either misunderstood the directions or, more probably, was gossiping on a street corner.

"If you want something done," thought Laura, "do it yourself."

She took a coat from the closet, slipped it on over her evening gown, wrapped a scarf around her hair, and went out into the passage. She paused outside Nickie's door and tapped.

His voice asked, "Who is it?"

Laura told him of Paul's arrival and asked him to take the girls and their boy friends on ahead to the launches. Humming, she hurried down into the vestibule and out into the wet, gray half light.

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As she started from the hotel, the little figure of Kitty Cullen came into view, half hidden behind a tower of packages.

"Oh, Mrs. B., I found the divinest shop for blouses. Am I terribly late?"

"No, dear. There's plenty of time."

Laura repeated the news of Paul's arrival to Kitty, and moved on. The shoemaker's shop was down one of the tiny, unfrequented alleys which led toward the wharf on the Grand Canal.

Except for an occasional dim street light, the pathway, winding under stone arches and past great palace walls, was in almost total darkness. A small, gleaming canal serpented around it. There was a humped, unexpected bridge, a sharp turn, then another bridge.

Laura kept a lookout for the conspicuous yellow slicker, but there was no sign of Rosa or, for that matter, of anybody at all. Venetians sensibly hate rain and always scuttle to cover at the first drop.

The shop was just beyond the second bridge. Laura reached the bridge and, pausing, peered forward through the gloom. She could see no light. That probably meant the shop was closed.

The drizzle wasn't heavy now, but everything, even the stone walls, seemed saturated with moisture. It was like being in a city under the sea. The loneliness, the absence of normal human sounds, depressed Laura. She glanced along the deserted canal, hoping to catch a glimpse of some living thing.

She saw no one, but, just before she started forward again, her eyes fell on something lying in the water close under the bridge. It held her attention because she could not make out what it was.

She crossed to the balustrade of the bridge and gazed down. It was large and pale, not exactly white, more yellowish . . .

Sudden as hysteria, a dreadful suspicion surged up in her. She felt dizzy and, for a moment, supported herself against the stone balustrade. Then, with an immense effort, she forced herself to run back along the bridge and down to the bank of the canal.

The object was only a few inches from her, lying flaccid in the sluggish water. Yellowish—yellow!

She made herself stretch her hand across the water; it touched the nearest part of the object. She forced her fingers to lift it upward.

The thing she had raised, dripping, from the water, was a human hand, thrust out from a bright yellow slicker sleeve.

She screamed, then, piercingly, and let the hand drop back into the water.

In what seemed an incredibly short time the dark silence became filled with the sound of running footsteps and high, inquiring voices. People were everywhere around her, crowding to the bank.

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Already two men had plunged up to their thighs in the shallow canal. They were dragging—yes, say it—they were dragging *Rosa* out.

Snatches of Italian erupted around her: Poor woman . . . dead . . . drowned? . . . No, look at her head . . . murdered . . .

Rosa in *her* slicker, running *her* errand, hit on the head—*murdered!*

No one was paying any attention to her. The crowd, jostling from all sides, had slowly pushed her away from the body. Two *carabinieri* were taking charge. She doubted whether anyone was even aware of the fact that it was she who had given the alarm.

She stood trying to regain control of herself. As she did so, she became dimly conscious of American voices behind her. She recognized the girls of the Tour, and the sense of a new emergency steadied her.

She turned from the fringes of the crowd and hurried toward the voices. There they all were—the girls in their party dresses, Nickie, the current boy friends, and the Count. They made a large group, filling the alleyway, gazing with interest toward the excited group of Italians.

Holly saw her first. "Why, Mrs. B., what's all the commotion?"

"It's some woman." Laura was surprised at the calmness of her own voice. "She's fallen in the canal."

"Let's take a look," suggested one of the boy friends.

"No," snapped Laura. "There are enough people around already. For mercy's sake, let the poor woman alone." She turned to Nickie, who was watching her gravely. "Nickie, go along, please—all of you. You know where the launches are."

"But, Mrs. B., you look—are you all right?"

"Of course I am. I was just going for my slippers, but the shop's closed. I'll go back to the hotel for Paul and join you later. Go on, all of you. Please."

They were all starting toward the bridge, on their way to the dock where the launches waited. Laura, hoping passionately that the crowd would be too thick and the light too dim for them to recognize the yellow slicker, took a few steps after them. Yes, it was going to be all right. They had begun to move on.

She waited until they were out of the danger zone. Then her moment of artificial steadiness was over. Her knees felt weak as a baby's and her teeth were chattering.

She turned her back on the crowd and started swiftly along the alley toward the hotel. For the second time she had run away from a corpse. She realized that, but once again it seemed the only decision to make. Everything would be done that had to be done. No one need ever know that Laura Black, of Mrs. Black's Tours, had been the one who had given the first scream.

(*Continued on page 99*)

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There was nothing small-time about Jocko. When he planned a caper, man, it was the biggest!

THE GREATEST SNATCH IN HISTORY

by STEVE APRIL

I'LL SAY THIS FOR JOCKO, THERE'S nothing small-time about him. Man, when he thinks up a job, he thinks big, like the largest!

We're sitting and resting against a wall, merely killing time, when Jocko asked, "Buddy-boy, you ever been in Montevideo?"

"Maybe. What is it, a night club?"

"Montevideo is the capital of Uruguay, a South American country. It's a large modern city on the Rio de La Plata river. I was there during the war."

I didn't know what I was supposed to say. Jocko is kind of ancient. Like the war he's jawing about wasn't Korea or Vietnam, but World War II, I guess. I wasn't even born then.

"I been thinking about it," Jocko said, "because I read in the paper this morning that a week from today the President is flying down there—a good-will visit as the guest of the president of Uruguay. But the President's flying down in a Ura-Airline jet. Buddy, we could pull the greatest snatch in history—kidnap the President of the United States!"

"My God, Jocko, are you out of your fuzzy skull?" I asked jerking forward with the shock. Why, the idea was too large to even think about. "There must be a gang of F.B.I. and Secret Service and other Feds guarding the President! We'd need an army of a thousand punks to pull a job like that, with the odds still against us!"

Jocko sighed. "You're wrong, Buddy-boy. The way I see it, only four guys could do it. We'll need some muscle, which is where you come in. We'll need a radio operator and I worked radios when flying the anti-sub patrol out of Puerto Rico. We got to have a slick con cat, a cool operator who can think fast on his feet. Like Frank Dawson who works those phony door-to-door sales pitches. Yeah, Frankie will be just right, if we can keep him sober. That's where the fourth guy comes in, a steady joker, tough, no imagination, to keep an eye on Frankie. A guy we can trust all the way. I'm thinking of your cousin Lenny. Would he cross us, Buddy?"

"No. But stop this kind of talk, Jocko, you're making me dizzy. It's all too big, too far-out. We'd get killed, at least!"

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"Buddy, the biggest jobs are often the easiest because nobody expects 'em to be pulled. Who would dream of the President of the United States being snatched? If you stop to think about it, it's probably easier to rob the U.S. Mint than to stick up a one-horse bank."

"Hell, this is nutty talk. Do you think four slobs can battle the Feds and the Ura-whatever-that-country-is security guards?"

"Buddy," Jocko said slowly, "we won't have to fire a shot, just because our heist *is* so unheard-of. We'll need maybe five grand for operating money, but the payoff will be a cool million in cash. Buddy, it can be done!"

I didn't even answer. The very thought gave me the shakes. All I've ever done is hold up a few gas stations, roll some drunks, mug some old geezers.

"Buddy, have you dozed off?"

"I wish I could! I don't want to hear no more of this crazy scheme. Even if we somehow carried it off, where in the world can you stash away the President of the United States?"

Jocko sighed again. "Buddy, you'll always be a two-bit hustler because you lack vision. The President won't even know he's being snatched!"

"Aw, Jocko, lay off me. I'm hung up enough as it is."

"Buddy, nothing is impossible in this atomic age. Some things are never done only because nobody dared think about 'em. Listen to me carefully. In a day or two we fly down to a West Indian island, like Trinidad, under some false name and then fly back under our real names. I'll figure that detail out later—maybe we'll dye our skins or something to look like natives. Now get this: jet time from Washington to Uruguay is about seven and a half hours—that's our working time.

"Now, the way I picture it, and this is off-the-top-of-my-head-thinking, you and I will be at the Washington airport. Like I said, the President is flying on a Ura-Airline jet—as a good-will favor because they're just starting the line. Our only real risk is getting on that plane. But I used to *habla espanol* pretty good and if I cram up for a couple days, I'll talk Spanish well enough to get by. You, you'll keep your trap shut. We'll have some Ura-Air uniforms made and just nonchalantly go aboard—say that we're assigned as extra crew. The thing is, we'll appear at the last second, when there's no time to check with their main office. I mean, they sure wouldn't delay the President's flight, would they? The main idea is, we have to be on that jet."

"Sure, rave on," I mumbled.

"Now, let's say the plane takes off at nine a.m. We go forward at once to the cockpit and I know enough about radios to snafu their set so they can't send, but can still receive. As the muscle goon, your

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job will be to keep the pilot, co-pilot, flight engineer, navigator and radio man all covered and under control. Plus keeping the cockpit door locked. You won't belt nobody, just threaten 'em. Now, by nine thirty a.m. the jet is over the Atlantic, out of U.S. territory, and has lost radio contact with the outside world. See, nobody knows exactly where the plane is."

"Dream on, Jocko, but to yourself. Let me have my own nightmares."

"Punks like you are a dime a dozen, Buddy, I don't need you! You want to hear my plan or do you want to remain a two-bit ape until some stronger ape knocks you off?"

"Okay, okay, I'll listen. But I haven't bought the deal."

"Listen, slob. Now, for the next seven hours no radio messages can be sent from the President's jet. At nine forty-five our contact man, Frankie, is at C.I.A. headquarters, outside Washington. He—"

"Whatcha dragging the C.I.A. in for?"

"Because it would take hours of red tape to see anybody important at the White House and maybe days before they agree to pay the ransom. But the C.I.A. has bundles of loose cash around, the green they supply to their secret agents on a minute's notice. Frankie tells them the President has been snatched. He also warns against doing anything to him—Frankie—or the President will never be seen again. All a bluff, of course, but it will work. By ten a.m. the C.I.A. already knows the jet is out of radio contact. Now, they might send up search planes from our Carribean bases, but as I'll explain in a second, I doubt if they will. You following me, Buddy-boy?"

"Yeah."

"Okay, Frankie asks for a million bucks. I'll have to work out Frankie's getaway details later. The thing is, he should have the loot by eleven a.m. at the latest, giving him at least five hours to scram. Frankie is good at disguises and we'll figure out something simple, like he and your cousin Lenny get jobs as farm stiffs in Virginia a few days before the snatch, return to their work, and then join us in Trinidad later. I'll tell you this now, when we start spending that million we'll do it quietly. Say, live like tourists in Mexico, something like that."

"Don't overlook you and me. Which firing squad are we facing, a U.S. or a South American one?"

"Stop the jerk talk!" Jocko said, anger in his low voice. Even if he is old, Jocko's too mean a guy to get riled. You know what I mean? "As for us," he added, "there's a door where the first-class passengers come aboard. There's also parachutes. We'll make the pilot come in low—say, at two thousand feet—as he approaches South America. Then we bail out. It's—"

"*Me* jump out a plane?" I cut in.

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"Nothing to it, Buddy. We'll land on or near Trinidad and stay there under the phony names we planted until Frankie joins us. We'll still have three hours before the jet lands and can give any alarm, since their broadcasting is out. That's *if* they ever give any alarm."

"*If?* You telling me we snatch the President of the United States —snatch the *President!*—and nothing will be said about it?"

"That's right. That's also why search planes won't be sent up. First, a million bucks is just pin money to Washington. Next, we're dealing with governments, the U.S. and Uruguay, and when governments got to make decisions a lot of things are considered and a lot of time is lost. Like once the President lands and they know he's safe, then they got to get the two governments together and decide whether it's smart policy to admit anything at all. Uruguay has millions in this new airline, so they sure don't want no bad publicity. Certainly the C.I.A. doesn't want to look like chumps. So the chances are the whole thing will be hushed up." Jocko's voice died, as if he was deep in thought.

Then he said loudly, his voice full of awe. "Buddy, I almost wish it *won't* be hushed up! Then it becomes known we've pulled the greatest snatch on record! They'll never find us, but we'll go down in world history as the—"

Banging his club on the bars, the guard growled, "You two bums in the drunk tank don't shut up, I'll come in and give you a taste of my billy! Always you petty, wino-panhandlers who cause the most trouble in a can."

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Once again Schlock Homes is called in to serve his country. Once again vital plans are missing, and if The Great Detective should fail to recover the documents, the very foundations of the Empire would crumble. Once again England's future depends on Schlock Homes's amazing brain—and a more amazing brain has never investigated, analyzed, and "deducted" in the annals of detection . . .

THE ADVENTURE OF THE MISSING THREE-QUARTERS

by ROBERT L. FISH

MY NOTES FOR THE EARLY PART of the year '65 contain several instances of more than passing interest for those who follow the adventures of my friend, Mr. Schlock Homes. There was, for example, his brilliant solution to the mysterious gunning down of a retired boilermaker, a case which I find listed as *The Adventure of the Shot and the Bier;* and there is also reference to the intriguing business of the hitchhiking young actress, noted in my journal as *The Adventure of the Ingénue's Thumb.*

It was not, however, until the month of June that a problem of major import came his way, allowing him full scope for his feats of analytical legerdemain, as well as once again permitting him to be of service to his country. In my casebook I find the curious affair noted as *The Adventure of the Missing Three-Quarters.*

It was early afternoon and I had returned to our quarters at 221B Bagel Street; I had been in the midst of a most interesting tracheotomy when I discovered I had somehow forgotten my sutures at home. I went to my room and obtained them, and was passing the sitting-room when I chanced to peer in to find Homes bending absorbedly over his laboratory bench. At the sight of me his face lit up with an excited smile.

"Ah, Watney!" said he with pleasure. "You are just in time! The olives, if you please."

I hastened to comply, and a moment later found myself with a dry martini in my hand and a napkin on my lap. Homes decanted a beaker of the solution into another glass and seated himself across from me. There was a strange look in his eye, a sure sign that this had not been his first laboratory experiment of the day.

"Watney," he said, studying the concoction in his hand, "are you busy this afternoon?"

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"Nothing that cannot wait," I replied. "Why do you ask?"

He frowned at his drink for several moments. When at last he spoke, however, it was not to answer my query, but rather to pose a second question of his own.

"Tell me, Watney," he asked slowly, "what do the words 'leg of mutton sleeves,' and 'ruffled hemline,' and 'belt in the back' mean to you?"

I paused, considering his question, and then set my drink aside, tenting my fingers in that pose I had often seen my friend adopt when applying his masterful brain in similar situations.

"Well," I said thoughtfully, "leg of mutton sleeves would undoubtedly be warm, although I should also expect them to be quite greasy. Hemline, of course, is the small village in Germany where the Pied Piper appeared, and after the loss of the children it is scarcely surprising to hear that the village is ruffled. As for belt in the back—" I hesitated a moment and then gave up. "I'm afraid I do not know, Homes," I admitted, "but I must say it sounds a bit cowardly."

To my surprise he did not smile at my failure to define the last phrase. Instead his frown increased and he shook his head.

"To tell you the truth," he said slowly, "I also do not know. However, to satisfy your curiosity regarding these strange words, they were contained in a rather garbled message I received from my brother Criscroft this morning. He further stated that he would drop by after lunch, so possibly we shall soon have clarification." He sat up, his frown disappearing. "Ah! Even sooner than I expected, for here, if I am not mistaken, is Criscroft now."

There was the tramp of footsteps on the stairway, and a moment later the door had swung back and Criscroft was framed in the opening. He refused my offer of a drink almost curtly, a sure sign of his perturbation, and then flung himself in a chair, regarding the two of us in brooding silence for several moments before he spoke.

"Schlock," he said at last, his voice fraught with worry, "a major crisis has arisen, and I fear I must once again ask your help."

"Of course," Homes said, leaning forward, his eyes warm with sympathy. "How can I be of aid?"

Criscroft continued to frown darkly. "Plans are missing," he said heavily. "Vital plans. If they are not recovered before evening, I fear England shall suffer greatly!"

Homes studied his brother's rigid features, and then nodded. "Tell me all."

"Yes." Criscroft came to his feet and began striding the room, his hands clasped tightly behind his back. After several turns up and down he came back to stand before us, staring at the rug fiercely, putting his thoughts in order.

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"Yes," he repeated, and brought his eyes up. "Well, the situation is this. As you may or may not know, Britain is suffering gravely from a serious lack of exports, and every means for alleviating the situation has been considered. The Queen's Council on Economic Affairs has determined that priority in the recovery plan shall be given to placing England in first position in the world of fashion." His hand came up abruptly, forestalling interruption. "Do not take the matter lightly! France owes much of its economic strength to women's styles, and we are determined that this rich lode of foreign exchange shall not remain untapped.

"To this end, therefore, the Council has arranged a contest in which designers from every country have been asked to submit their designs. To insure that fairness prevails, and to reduce the possibility of information leaking out, no sketches or pictures of any kind have been permitted. The designs are being submitted in the form of simple patterns, and the same group of dressmakers—under international supervision—will fabricate all the gowns."

"So far," Homes said with a slight frown, "I see little to disturb you to this degree." His voice became chiding. "Surely you have faith in this country's designers being easily able to dominate a contest of this—or any other—sort?"

"You do not know the whole unhappy story. Pray allow me to continue. Well, we selected as our entrant a most promising young talent. His name is Donald Orr—head of D. Orr & Company—and in order to free him completely from other preoccupations during the contest, we arranged for him to do his work at Medicinal Manor, the town home of the Earl of Wintergreen. He—" Criscroft paused and eyed Homes sharply. "You spoke?"

"No, no. It is only that I am familiar with Medicinal Manor; the Earl is an old friend of mine. I have been fortunate enough to enjoy the cuisine there several times; Jenny, his cook, is undoubtedly the finest in all London. But I digress—pray forgive me, and continue."

"Ah! Well, possibly your knowledge of the premises will be of some usefulness. We shall see. To go on, then: Orr completed his work early this morning and then hid his patterns before he left the Manor for a brief walk. Unfortunately, he has spent some time recently in the American colonies, and he apparently forgot his 'Look Right, Look Left,' because when he stepped from a kerb on his way back, he was struck by a dray, and even now is in St. Barts in bad state."

I sat up in alarm. "If I can be of any assistance—"

"No, no! He is in competent hands; a nurse's aide is caring for him. The thing is, he is unconscious, and the only words he spoke before he lapsed into his uncon-

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scious condition was to say he had hidden the plans in the kitchen. Those phrases I sent you this morning were found on a slip of paper in his pocket. Needless to say, we have searched the culinary area thoroughly, but without success. The Earl was not informed of the purpose of Orr's visit, and therefore can be of no aid. Frankly, unless you can help, we are lost!"

Criscroft's voice sank even lower. "The contest ends to-night, and the dressmakers will work until dawn in order to present the gowns early to-morrow morning. If we are unable to locate the patterns by six o'clock this evening, England will have initiated a contest in which it will not even have an entrant! You can easily imagine the shame of it!"

Homes peaked his fingers and closed his eyes as he considered the complex problem. At last he opened them, looking up and speaking thoughtfully.

"To attempt to solve the code contained in those garbled phrases," said he, "would undoubtedly take more time than we have at our disposal. No; our only hope is to once again search the kitchen at the Manor, but this time to do it with more intelligence." He came to his feet swiftly. "If you will allow me time to dress suitably, I shall join you at once."

Criscroft shook his head sadly. "Much as I should like to accompany you, and vital as this case is, I fear it cannot be. To-day is our weekly whist at the club." His eyes came up, stern and demanding. "But remember this, Schlock—England's future is in your hands!"

"I shall not forget!" Homes promised in a ringing voice, and then swung about, perplexed. "Now, what was I looking for a minute ago? Ah, yes. My deerstalker!"

It was less than an hour later that our hansom cab deposited us at the door of Medicinal Manor in Payne Square. Homes paid the cabby and we mounted the steps; the pull-cord was finally answered by Rhett, the old butler. His wizened face broke into a smile of delight as he recognized my companion.

"Mr. Homes, sir! It's good to see you again! Come in, come in."

"Hello, Rhett," Homes said genially, and followed the bent figure into the cavernous hallway with me close at his heels. "Is your master at home?"

The old retainer's smile disappeared as he closed the door and turned to face us. He shook his head sadly. "I'm afraid not, Mr. Homes. He has taken the children off for the day, to take their minds from the troubles, poor tykes. I fear you have come at a bad time, sir."

"Troubles? Bad time?" Homes enquired sharply. "How is that?"

Old Rhett spread his veined hands apologetically. "Well, sir, first there was that tragic affair of that young gentleman, Mr. Orr, go-

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ing out and stepping beneath a horse, and shortly thereafter Jenny went sneaking from the kitchen with something under her apron—undoubtedly food—and locked herself in her room, refusing to open the door."

Homes frowned. "Jenny? Locked herself in her room?"

"Yes, sir. Undoubtedly a fit of temper caused by too many guests. However, I have been given instructions by the gentlemen from the Home Office to give you the run of the house, so—" His gnarled hand waved gently towards the interior of the house. "If you require me for anything, sir, you have only to ring."

"Thank you, Rhett," Homes said in a kindly voice, and led me in the direction of the kitchen. On our way he paused a moment outside of the cook's room, but the only sound to be heard from within was a faint whirring, as of some kind of machine. With a shrug at the inexplicable sounds made by women in a temper, Homes continued down the passage.

The vast kitchen was strangely empty without the presence of Jenny, and Homes stared about silently for several moments, his sharp eyes taking in the two huge wood ranges, the ice-chest, as well as the coffee-grinder in one corner.

"Well, Watney," he said thoughtfully at last, "we have little time. We had best get right to it."

He began his search with the ovens, and then considered the other modern appliances; all proved empty of anything useful to his purpose. He then attacked the cupboards, going through them carefully, after which he moved to the drawers. Each was withdrawn, peered into intently, and then replaced. The closets followed, and when these had also been inspected without yielding any clew, Homes stepped back, frowning blackly.

"If Mr. Orr said he hid them in the kitchen," he muttered, almost to himself, "then he hid them in the kitchen! He would have no reason to lie. We must be overlooking something."

"But what, Homes?" I asked in bewilderment.

"I do not know!" he replied savagely, and then bent, as a last resort, to look beneath the sink. The rubbish bin there was filled to capacity; there was a sudden startled gasp from my companion and then he swiftly reached out to pick something from the top of the bin. He arose with a strange light in his eye. I moved closer; he was holding a plain card-board tube about twelve inches in length and approximately one inch in diameter.

"But, Homes!" I cried. "What is it? Why are you studying it so intently?"

"Later, Watney," he exclaimed, and in two strides had returned to the cupboard counter, staring down at it with a gleam in his eye. I followed his glance, but all I could

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note were some crumbs, and a knife lying back against a bread-board. Homes was nodding to himself in satisfaction; his whole attitude clearly demonstrated that he had discovered some valuable clew overlooked by the previous searchers.

"Of course!" he muttered to himself. "I am a fool! I should have seen it at once!"

"Seen what, Homes?" I asked, puzzled by the entire affair.

"There is no time now," he said, turning to me swiftly. "Ring for the butler at once."

Completely mystified, I hastened to follow his orders, and a moment later old Rhett had shuffled into the room. Homes moved forward, his eyes gleaming. "You say his Lordship has taken the children off for the afternoon. Did he perchance take them for a picnic tea in Hempstead Heath?"

"Why, yes, Mr. Homes," said the butler in utter amazement, "although how you knew it, I cannot imagine!"

"No matter," Homes said in triumph, and leaned closer. "What part of the heath would he be most likely to visit? Come, man, think! Time is of the essence!"

"His Lordship usually favors the Poet's Corner—" Rhett began in his quavering voice, but Homes had already disengaged himself and was moving quickly and purposefully towards the front of the house.

He trotted rapidly down the steps with me at his heels and flagged down the first hansom that appeared, jumping into it and pulling me after. "Hempstead Heath, driver!" he cried urgently. "The Poet's Corner! And hurry!"

We came clattering up through Swiss Cottage in the direction of Golder's Green while I hung on desperately to the sides of the swaying vehicle and tried to make sense out of what was happening. Homes was leaning forward eagerly, his hair whipping about his face, as if in this way to somehow hasten our passage. The mysterious card-board tube was clutched fiercely in one hand.

"Homes!" I cried. "Pray explain! This whole thing is completely confusing."

"Is it?" he asked over his shoulder, and then leaned back, coming into the greater protection of the cab. He turned to me with a wide smile on his face. "We have ample time before we arrive at the heath, so allow me to give you a brief lesson in logic."

He raised the card-board tube, using it to tick off his points against the fingers of his other hand.

"One: we know the patterns were hidden in the kitchen. Two: they are not there now. The only possible conclusion to be reached is that they have been removed. But, excepting for the children, only two people have left the house—Mr. Donald Orr and his Lordship. Certainly there is no reason to suspect Mr. Orr, which only leaves us

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his Lordship. Therefore it was he who removed them."

I sat up in alarm. "The Earl of Wintergreen a traitor?"

"No, no, Watney! Remember that his Lordship was not familiar with the purpose of Mr. Orr's presence in his home, nor of the contest. True, he removed the patterns, but he did it inadvertently."

"Inadvertently?" I exclaimed.

"Precisely! You may recall the crumbs on the cupboard counter. Certainly Jenny, before locking herself in her room for some unknown reason, would not have left her kitchen in such a state of disarray. She is far too well-trained for that. Therefore, somebody used it after her. Since it could only have been his Lordship, and since he was taking the children out, it was fairly easy to deduce a picnic tea. Hempstead Heath being the closest park, it was logical to assume he had taken them there."

I shook my head in admiration. "It is so clear when you explain it, Homes," I said, and then frowned. "But you have still said nothing of the missing patterns."

He raised the thin card-board tube he had been holding so tightly. "This, Watney, is an empty container for a roll of waxed paper. When his Lordship discovered he was out of waxed paper in which to wrap his sandwiches, he quite naturally searched for a substitute, and found the patterns. Being unaware of their true importance—"

I stared at him, aghast. "Homes! You mean?—"

"Exactly! Let us pray we are not too late!" He bent forward again as our cab swerved wildly into the heath and raced along the winding dirt road that led to the Poet's Corner. Suddenly Homes raised himself, peering forward excitedly. "That carriage!" he cried. "It is Wintergreen's—he is leaving!"

Our driver leaned down from his box, shouting tensely. The spirit of the chase had undoubtedly entered him as well. "Shall I go after him, sir?"

"No, no!" Homes cried. "Stop here! And wait for us!" He flung a coin in the direction of our Jehu and dragged me from the cab even before it had fully stopped. "Watney! Quickly, before the wind snatches them away! The sandwich-wrappers!"

We rushed about, picking up the pieces of paper and smoothing them out, attempting to get them all, and then at last paused, panting, when the last visible one had been rescued. Homes's sharp eyes scanned the landscape, but as far as we could see, none of the wrappers had escaped us. With the precious pieces of paper held tightly, my friend ran back to the hansom and entered. I climbed wearily in behind him and fell against the seat, fighting for my breath. The driver instantly whipped up his horses, heading for the City.

"And now, Homes?" I asked,

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when at last I was able to speak.

"Now?" he asked, leaning back with a triumphant smile on his face. "Now we shall deliver these patterns to Criscroft at his club, after which our obligation will have been fulfilled. It has been a pretty problem, and I believe this evening I shall relax from it with a few bars of Hershey on my violin. If you wish you may turn the pages."

"I should like that, Homes," I exclaimed warmly, "but I really do think I should return to the hospital. The chap I left there this morning has been remarkably patient, but still—"

Exhausted by our efforts of the previous day, it was well past the hour of noon when I entered the breakfast room to find Homes already there before me, the afternoon newspaper at his elbow, attacking his first kipper with Vigor, a new sauce he found to his liking. At the sight of me he glanced up from his journal, and then nodded as he answered the unspoken question in my eyes.

"Yes, Watney," he said gently, with a smile on his lips. "Our efforts of yesterday were crowned with success. Look for yourself."

He reached across the table, placing the folded journal on my plate; I seated myself and drew it to me. There was a picture on the front page; the headline above it read: *ENGLAND WINS FASHION CONTEST,* while below it, in smaller letters, was the caption: *Miniskirt Is Born!*

I frowned in puzzlement at the strange words, glanced at the picture, and then raised dazed eyes to my companion.

"Homes! Do you suppose—?"

He returned my horrified look equably. "It did occur to me last evening that possibly the Earl and the children had not eaten all their sandwiches, but had taken some home. However—" He shrugged. "—one should never quarrel with success." His smile dismissed the discussion. "And now, Watney, since you have the journal in hand, what other news do you find that might be of interest to us?"

I glanced at the prize-winning costume once again, and then hastily turned the page, running my eye down the columns, searching. Suddenly my eyebrows shot up.

"Homes!" I exclaimed. "Indeed there is! His Lordship, the Earl of Wintergreen, has asked assistance in locating his missing cook!"

Homes sat up in alarm. "Jenny has disappeared?"

"Yes," I said, and read further into the article. "It says here that when last seen, she was wearing a dress with puffed sleeves, a pleated skirt, and with a sash behind."

"With that description there should be no trouble in locating her," Homes said thoughtfully, and laid aside his napkin. "A telegram to his Lordship offering my services, if you will, Watney!"

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Lieutenant Selby of the OSS had earned a reputation for being an expert at puzzles—especially "impossible" ones. So when a particularly dirty job came along—especially if the job was "impossible"—Selby was elected . . .

MURDER OF A PRIEST

by ARTHUR PORGES

AFTER THE HORRORS OF GUADALCANAL, where green American troops, wanting strongly to live, met Japanese veterans anxious to die for the Emperor, Lieutenant Selby considered himself shockproof. So far, his stint with the OSS had not disillusioned him. But now he stared at Colonel Hacker, gulped, and stammered, "Kill him? Me? You mean you want me to kill a—a priest!"

Colonel Hacker's face was set like iron; his eyes were somber.

"It's a dirty war," he said. "And this is a dirty job. But absolutely necessary."

Selby hesitated for a moment, thinking in a vague way about the phrase "Direct disobedience of orders." You don't just say "No" to a Colonel.

"I can't," he said finally. "It's not for me. Anything else, okay. But to murder an innocent man—a priest—!"

Hacker's eyes narrowed, and for a moment they looked as alarming as the muzzles of two pistols. But when he spoke his voice was level, almost toneless.

"Before we start going around in circles," he said, "you'd better have the whole picture. It may knock out some of that righteousness." Selby flushed darkly, but the Colonel went on as if he had seen nothing. "Our contact in the French Resistance is yelling for quick help; their whole organization is in danger of being smashed—"

"But damn it, sir—one man isn't supposed to know that much! I thought they had tight little cells, with each one completely independent from the others, with nobody wise to men in a different group."

"That's true, in general," Hacker said. "But this once things got out of hand. The priest not only was active in his own cell, but he heard things at confession. It was risky, but seemed necessary at the time. Anyhow, his cover was very good, and except for bad luck they'd have gotten away with it. But Father Placide was rounded up with a bunch of hostages—the Germans want the name of the man who shot General Lindorf, so as usual they're holding women, children, priests—anybody handy.

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"Hell of it is, somebody or something got them suspicious about Father Placide. They have some they think are bigger fish—the Gestapo means to work them over first. But in a few days at the most they'll get to Father Placide, and he'll break. He's over sixty, dedicated—all the guts in the world—but he'll talk. They all do. The Resistance knows it; we know it. Just a matter of time. Nobody can hold out indefinitely when the Gestapo really bears down hard."

"He could kill himself," Selby said, making his voice harder than normal. "Isn't that the usual way out? I mean—he doesn't *want* to help the Germans. And you say he's a brave man."

"Sure," the Colonel said dryly. "I guess you're not a Catholic, Lieutenant. Father Placide couldn't possibly take his own life—that's a mortal sin. That's why—" Hacker gave Selby a cold stare—"he's passed the word to his friends that they're to do the job for him. I'd call that pretty brave, wouldn't you?"

Selby reddened again.

"You win—I guess. But it's still a dirty job, and I don't see where I come in at all. Some other Frenchman in the bunch with him—right on the spot—could do it. You don't need any special talent to kill an old man who isn't even going to fight back. Damn it, Colonel—"

"It's not that simple," Hacker said, surprisingly patient. He didn't say so, but he would have taken a queasy dislike to anyone who had accepted this assignment cheerfully. Selby's reaction to the job was that of any decent man even in a dirty war. To kill the enemy in the field, with both of you armed and menacing—that was one thing; assassination of an old man—that was another.

"They're holding Father Placide in one room, alone. As I said, they've been tipped he may know something. Now nobody from the outside can get to him—that's the problem in a nutshell."

"What's the building like?" Selby asked.

"It used to be a seminary of some kind. Lots of rooms not much different from prison cells except for such rudimentary comforts as running water—cold—johns, and central heat. I doubt if the present occupants get much use out of any of those.

"It's a big solid building in the heart of town, and as Gestapo HQ it's damn well guarded. Father Placide's cell is one of those without a window; I guess they have—or had—lights of some kind, maybe even electricity. But there he is, tucked away in the middle of the place, behind a heavy door, and due to be questioned any day now. And it's either him or dozens of key men. That's the story."

"Why the hell don't the others—the ones in danger—run right now? Wouldn't that be much simpler?"

"No," Hacker said brusquely.

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"They're not isolated individuals. They have families, relatives, friends. If the actual fighters and saboteurs clear out, they might make it alone to England or Spain. But the organization would be ruined for months, maybe forever. There aren't so many men who can do the jobs at the top, believe me. And besides, they'd have to leave wives and children behind. The Germans would grab them immediately, either for revenge, or to force the leaders back—the same old hostage bit.

"No, Lieutenant, it has to be Father Placide. It's what he wants, and it's what the situation calls for. Sure, it's a dirty job, but keep telling yourself about the alternatives."

Once more the Colonel's eyes bored into Selby's. "You'll be leaving tonight. No plane this time. Small boat across the channel—it's a coastal town."

"And I'm supposed to kill a man inside a windowless room in Gestapo HQ," Selby said, almost to himself. "Nothing to it." His huge Adam's apple bobbed. "I'll use voodoo—damned if I can think of any other way."

"You will," Hacker assured him with a tight, mirthless grin. "You're an expert at puzzles—especially impossible ones."

Selby's trip was uneventful except for seasickness, a specialty of those choppy waters. That kept him from making even the vaguest or wildest plans—which was just as well, since anything conceived of before studying the building was not likely to work.

In his by now familiar role of a retarded Frenchman—a nephew of old Dr. Morin—he was able to walk the streets, but very cautiously, as the Germans, their hands full of hostages, and the town a powder keg, were edgy.

His first examination of the former seminary didn't help his confidence, already far from high. Deep inside he heard a nagging voice that whispered slyly, Try and fail! It's too tough—you can't do it, anyhow. So fail, and let the priest's blood be on somebody else's hands.

It was advice hard to ignore. The job might very well be literally impossible. Why fight it, then? Who can unscrew the inscrutable?—as the old word-play went.

But then he'd recall Colonel Hacker's comment. The alternatives—the equally impossible alternatives! Maybe twenty good men would be captured, tormented, slaughtered. Or if they ran, their families would suffer—indescribably. One life against many—that timeless, searing, heartbreaking moral dilemma, so often debated in theory, so terrifying in stark fact.

Reluctantly Selby made his choice. If there was a way to kill Father Placide he would have to find it. Maybe, with luck, he could then pass the ultimate move on to others . . .

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But the big building, a mass of gray stone, with only two doors, both guarded constantly, seemed invulnerable. Even if the Resistance made a suicidal foray, attacking frontally, they could never reach Father Placide's cell. It was on the second floor, accessible only by a long corridor. There were more soldiers up there, in a guard room. And a hundred yards from the building a battalion of the Wehrmacht had its barracks. Sure, they were older men, retreads, but their machine-pistols were new, their armored cars formidable.

"Isn't there anybody inside the place to help us?" Selby asked, peering at the gloomy faces in the kitchen of Morin's house. "Not a single man of yours there?"

"Yes," Roget told him sourly. "We have two. But they cannot get near the actual cells; they are kept on the first floor."

Roget was a dark, blocky, hairy man, even stronger than he looked. His English was excellent, and he acted as the American's interpreter.

"We can get messages to Pere Placide—sometimes; but that is all. No gun, no poison—even if he would use them; but he will not." Himself a freethinker, Roget spat. "Afraid of a mortal sin! Me, I'd be afraid of the Gestapo—and of betraying my comrades."

The others glared at him.

"Pere Placide is a saint," Dubois snapped. "Be quiet, you filth!"

"This is bad," Selby cut in quickly, fearing a brawl. He needn't have worried. They were all in the same war—Catholic, Protestant, Atheist, Communist, Anarchist; right now there was only the common enemy. Afterward, of course . . .

"No ideas, M'sieur?" Dr. Morin asked him.

"Not so far," Selby admitted, his face glum.

One of the younger men, shrugging, pulled out a sheet of paper, and by the dim light of an ancient oil lamp he began scribbling. This behavior, in the circumstances, seemed so odd that Selby craned his neck to look.

What he saw was something quite unexpected, something that took him back several years, to before the war. Surely this French boy couldn't be trying—but he was; no doubt about that. Three rectangles above, three below, and he was drawing lines.

"I'll be damned!" the Lieutenant breathed, and the boy, seeing who was watching, flushed.

"Quoi?" he mumbled.

"Tell him it can't be done," Selby said to Roget. "You can't connect the upper and lower rectangles with three lines each—not without crossing a line. They usually state the puzzle as three houses with—"

He broke off, ignoring a constellation of gaping stares. "By God!" he added in a low voice.

"What is it, Lieutenant?" Roget asked. "You have thought of some way, *hein?*"

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"I don't know—maybe. Can you get me a plan of the building?"

"There would be blueprints at the Mairie. But we know already about all the rooms, and the corridors, the roof, the basement—"

"No," Selby said sharply. "Not those." He looked slowly around the room at each man in turn. "I just remembered that even the most closely guarded house always has three open roads. The Germans won't be watching those."

He knuckled weary eyes. "I have to figure this out. What do we need? A hand drill, a big syringe—the kind a horse doctor might have. Hmm. Is there a photographer in town? Or an etcher? Say, a drug store—no, I mean—do you call him a pharmacist or chemist, like the English?"

Aware that his voice had a touch of hysteria, he regained control. Then slowly, in a low, calm voice, he explained how to murder Father Placide, patriot, priest, and martyr . . .

Back at OSS HQ in London, Selby, haggard and pale, with a haunted look in his eyes, reported to Colonel Hacker.

"No," Selby said. "I didn't wait for the results. To be honest, I passed the buck. Told them how to do the job, and ran. If that calls for a court-martial, go ahead."

"Sit down," the Colonel said. He opened his desk, and took out a squat, greenish bottle. "Take a slug of this, Lieutenant. You need it—and earned it, according to the French radio."

Selby gulped the bourbon; it was good stuff; the best; a Colonel's tipple, in fact.

"Then," he said, a hum in his voice, "Father Placide is . . ."

"Yes," Hacker said somberly. "He's dead."

"Hurray for me."

"I've no idea how you pulled it off, though. For the record, I ought to know."

"The Threefold Way," Selby said. A large drink on an empty stomach was having its effect.

"Meaning?"

"There was this French kid working on a puzzle, trying to do the impossible—bring gas, water, and electricity from three stations to three houses, without any of the lines crossing. It can't be done—elementary topology. But it gave me the solution.

"There are three ways into every house—gas line, water line, electric line. Civilized houses, anyway," he added.

"We checked out that Father Placide's cell still had a cold-water tap. I got a blueprint of the old plumbing. Easy to tap a water line fifty feet from the building, behind a hedge. We passed word to the other prisoners—if they had water to lay off at a certain time. Got a whole pound of cyanide from a photographer—they use it, you know.

"Injected the stuff into a water

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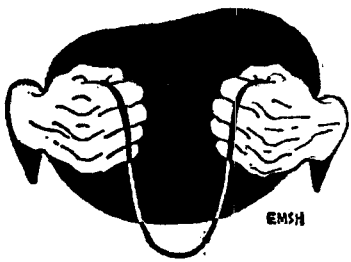
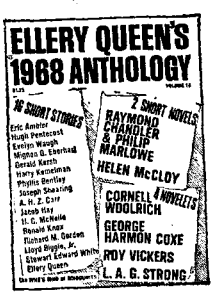
pipe before Father Placide had his next meal. No wine, so he was bound to drink a little water with the stale bread—all they gave him. But I didn't wait to find out. So he did it—the poor old man!"

"He did it," Hacker said quietly. "If it helps any," he added, "so did a Major of the Gestapo and several guards before they caught on."

Selby poured himself another drink, raised the glass, and looking at the Colonel said owlishly, "It's still a damned dirty war—sir!"

"That it is!" said Hacker, reaching for the bottle.





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Professor Bloch, a professional psychologist teaching at an unnamed university, is consulted by a graduate student who has a rather startling problem—a problem that would require the most delicate psychological handling. But Professor Bloch proved himself equal to the challenge . . .

THE DEATH WISH

by LARRY MADDOCK

"IT'S CALLED THE DEATH WISH," Professor Bloch explained, sucking noisily on his pipe. He was a smallish man, dark, with a quietly expensive taste in clothes. It was easy to visualize him, a few years in the future, as a highly successful Park Avenue psychotherapist.

"But suppose someone claims I have a killer instinct to match it," Sanford said. "Where does that leave me?"

"I see your problem. Actually, it's far more likely that Long himself has the killer instinct. In the mind of the psychotic one justifies the other. He wishes to die, therefore he can kill others and be punished for it. It's an endless circle."

Sanford considered this. "You mean Jimmy might try to kill *me?*"

"It is entirely possible."

"I don't think he has the guts."

"It takes courage to *resist* a compulsion, Sanford, not to indulge in it. Jimmy Long is quite capable of murdering you, particularly since he has identified you as a threat to his own life."

"But he wanted the threat!" Sanford's control suddenly weakened, and it was apparent that he bitterly resented the circumstances which had brought him to the psychologist's office. Although he was only five years younger than Professor Bloch, the gulf between them was as great as has ever existed between student and teacher.

"Exactly," said Bloch, punctuating his speech with his pipestem. "It is difficult to think of anything which could give him so much pleasure as knowing he might be murdered at any moment. As I said, the death wish."

"Professor," Sanford said nervously, "it gives *me* no pleasure at all."

"Of course not. How long have you known him?"

"Just this semester. I thought I was lucky my new roommate wasn't a football player. I don't have anything against athletes but I'd just as soon not have to room with them."

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"Long is the intellectual type, like yourself?"

Sanford was not accustomed to being called an intellectual; he smiled faintly at the label. "Jimmy Long," he said, "is sharp and clever but he broods a lot."

"When did he come to you with this, ah, proposition?"

"Last week. He said he'd been worried about the financial bind I've been in and had figured out a way to get around it. He knew what little money he could lend me wouldn't do much good. But he said he could make me rich in exchange for just one favor."

"He asked you to kill him."

"Yes. He showed me his insurance policy. It's for twenty-five thousand dollars. He'd had it changed, naming me as his new beneficiary—you can see he'd been planning this for some time."

"So it would appear," Bloch agreed.

"If he dies by accident, the payoff is fifty thousand. Double indemnity—he explained it in great detail."

"And what was your first reaction?"

"I put it down to one of his moods and tried to talk him out of it. Don't get me wrong, Professor—the idea of suddenly coming into that much money was attractive as all hell; but it wasn't right and I told him so. I tried to get him to change his beneficiary back to the way it was before, but he refused."

"I see." Bloch's expression was bland. "Tell me, Mr. Sanford—have you figured out just how to kill him?"

Sanford looked sharply at the psychologist. "What do you mean?"

"I assume you discussed possible methods with him."

"Well, yes," the other admitted, fingering his lower lip. "But strictly as a hypothetical exercise. I told him, look, Jimmy, suppose I did, how would I get away with it? He said it was easy—just make it look like an accident. He doesn't want to commit suicide—that would reflect badly on his family. Besides, he said he's too much of a coward to go through with it. He's tried to kill himself before, you know."

"How many times?"

"Five or six, he says. But he's afraid he might botch the job and end up a hopeless cripple. That's why he needs someone to help him. He asked me to make it swift, painless, and unexpected. We talked about it for several hours."

"Why did you come to me?" Professor Bloch asked.

"I don't know how to handle him," Sanford admitted. "Maybe you do—I hope so! But the biggest thing is, I'm scared."

Bloch's eyebrows lifted slightly. "Scared?"

"I've got plenty of use for that money. Jimmy Long wants to die. I suppose he's what you'd call 'suicide prone'."

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"I see. It would be most advantageous to you financially if he were to kill himself."

"It could be very messy," Sanford corrected. "If Jimmy dies and there's anything fishy about it, I'd be Suspect Number One!"

Bloch laughed harshly. "An uncomfortable position for you, indeed." he said. "You might have a difficult time proving that you hadn't lent a helping hand."

Sanford nodded. "And if somebody else kills him—for any reason—I still wind up as the guy with the best motive."

"Have you pointed this out to him?"

"You bet I have. But Jimmy won't listen. He told me he'd elected me as his executioner, and not to look a gift horse in the mouth. As far as he's concerned it's all settled."

"It *is* a challenge," the psychologist mused. "Aside from my teaching duties I'm retained as a consultant by a number of corporations for use in their college recruitment efforts. Interesting at times, but somewhat dull in the aggregate. This will be a refreshing break from my normal routine."

"What are you going to do?"

"I think first I should like to talk with Mr. James Long. You were right, Sanford, in bringing this to me instead of to the police. The college is extremely sensitive about any kind of scandal. A matter like this should be handled quietly."

"As long as it is handled," Sanford agreed.

Bloch rose from his chair. "I'll get in touch with you if I need your help."

"Thank you, sir. Just get him to change his beneficiary, that's all I ask."

Four days later Professor Bloch encountered Sanford on the campus. The psychologist was smiling. "I hoped I'd run into you, Richard. I believe I have the situation in hand. A fascinating case."

"He's changed the policy, I hope?" Sanford said anxiously.

"Not yet. But he's coming around to it. These things take time." Bloch paused, frowning. "Forgive me, but I've had to undermine his respect for you quite a bit."

"Anything, Doc," Sanford grinned, "as long as you get me off the hook."

"Exactly. Do you have time to come up to my office for a moment? It would be more convenient to discuss the matter there."

After they were settled comfortably in the small office, Bloch reopened the topic. "Jimmy thinks very highly of you, Sanford. To him you are quite a hero."

"I suppose so."

"You should never have told him about your overseas experiences. Did those exploits really happen?"

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Sanford nodded. "It was State Department business—very hush-hush—but they happened. I realize I shouldn't have bragged to Jimmy, but I'm afraid I was drunk that night."

"To him it was almost as if you were applying for the job."

"That's another reason why I can't be his beneficiary. I've killed seven men—would a jury believe I'd hesitate at one more?"

"I doubt it, and with such an excellent motive." Bloch frowned and fumbled with his pipe. "You are a trained killer, taught by wartime experts. Your record makes it difficult for me to convince Jimmy that you are really a coward instead of a hero, but I believe it can be done. With your help, of course."

Sanford smiled crookedly. "If you think it's necessary," he said.

Professor Bloch tamped tobacco into the bowl, kindled a large kitchen match, and sucked energetically at the flame until he was rewarded with thick, blue smoke. "Excellent. Here's what we'll do, then. There's a certain amount of risk involved, but I'll cover you with the school authorities."

"I'm used to risks, Professor," Sanford said mildly, and settled back to listen while the psychologist outlined his plan.

Three days went by, the last one full of seemingly spontaneous violence. On the fourth morning Sanford reached Professor Bloch by telephone.

"I've been trying to get you for hours," he began.

"Unfortunately, I was detained at the president's office. Our little scene yesterday was effective, was it not?"

"Sure was," Sanford agreed. "He detests me now. I put up the proper arguments to excuse my cowardice but he didn't buy them."

"Good. Will you be moving to another room?"

"I already have. But what'll I tell the other students? They're asking questions."

"What have you said so far?"

"I've refused to discuss it."

"Excellent. Continue being silent about it. If you're pressed for an explanation, use the same one you gave Long—that you didn't want to be expelled for slugging a faculty member."

"But I did swing at you."

"You didn't connect. That's the important point. Have you seen the Dean yet?"

"No," Sanford said. "Should I?"

"He'll call you in this afternoon. I've convinced him it was a psychological experiment and although he doesn't approve he has grudgingly agreed to go along with it. Your interview with him will be strictly a formality."

"Thank you." It was difficult to tell whether or not Sanford was being sarcastic.

"But," Bloch continued, un-

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ruffled, "you must give Jimmy the impression that it put the fear of God into you."

"I don't know that I like acting the coward," Sanford objected.

"There's something about dead heroes and live cowards that covers that, I think, Richard. I'll talk with you tomorrow. I expect by then Jimmy will have got in touch with me."

"I hope it works," Sanford said.

"It will," Professor Bloch assured him.

Two more days passed before the psychologist again conferred with Richard Sanford. They met this time in Bloch's home, which was as tastefully and expensively turned out as the man himself.

"You can relax, Richard," Bloch began. "I believe you're off the hook for good."

"Wonderful!" Sanford said, sipping the Professor's twelve-year-old Scotch.

"Jimmy saw me today and hinted that he would have a surprise for me next week," Bloch elaborated. "So far he has told me nothing about his death wish, but there are enough indications in his behavior to substantiate your story."

"You doubted it?" Sanford said.

"I did not doubt the facts, as you related them, but I had to convince myself that your interpretation of his personality was correct."

"I'm usually right about these things."

"I asked him if he could give me any insights into you, since the two of you were roommates. I told him you had serious personality problems and I was trying to cure you."

"What kind of problems?"

Bloch smiled. "I painted you as a psychopathic liar," he said. "Jimmy had a hard time accepting that, considering the intensity of his hero worship, but our public flurry of fisticuffs proved it to his satisfaction. He now believes that he was the one who engineered the fight between us."

"A neat trick of brain-washing."

"My specialty," Bloch replied with unpersuasive modesty.

"What's the surprise he's hinting about?"

"I believe he's making a change of beneficiary," the psychologist said. "Appointing a new executioner, so to speak."

"Who?"

"Me."

"That's handy," Sanford observed. "Now when he kills himself *you* can go to prison."

Bloch shook his head. "I was worried for a while that Jimmy would kill himself, but you were correct, Richard—he's afraid to."

"As I said—I'm usually right about these things."

"And," Bloch continued, eyeing his guest sardonically, "if he should meet with an accidental death, I'm in a considerably better position than you to defend myself with the authorities."

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"I'd think you'd be even more vulnerable."

"I'm preparing a case history of Mr. James Long which would exonerate me completely if ever such a need should arise."

Sanford smiled lazily. "You think the need will arise?"

"The probability of accidental death," Bloch stated, "is even more remote than that of suicide."

"You believe that?"

"Of course I do. If I were given the opportunity to conduct extensive psychotherapy I'm fairly certain Jimmy could be returned to normalcy." Bloch paused as a speculative look came into his eyes. "Next week he will present me with the same proposition he gave you."

"You're doing nothing to discourage this?"

"Why should I?" Bloch countered. "I'm handed a seriously aberrant personality under circumstances which afford intensive study. I'm working towards my doctorate, so—"

"I see," Sanford cut in. "Jimmy makes a nice guinea pig, is that it?"

"Exactly. The longer I can play the role of potential executioner the more I will profit from it later in professional fees."

"Why are you telling me this, Professor?"

Professor Bloch held his glass up to the light and gazed into it. "Let's just say I find it difficult to think of you merely as a student." His manner changed abruptly. "Anyway, I've got you off the hook."

"Thanks," Sanford said. "I have enough on my mind without facing a murder rap."

"I am aware of your situation. I understand you're rather deeply in debt."

Sanford nodded. "Foolish of me, but that's the way it is."

"Perhaps I can help," Bloch suggested. "I owe you something for giving me the opportunity to study Jimmy Long. Maybe we can work something out. You're finishing your postgraduate courses at the end of this term?"

"That's right."

"Where do you go from here?"

"I've had a couple of offers from electronics firms—nothing special, though."

"I'm quite involved in corporation recruitment," Bloch said. "You'd be surprised at the range of businesses which insist on psychological pre-evaluation of prospective employees. For instance, I have some connections in Chicago which might be useful to you. Shall we discuss your qualifications?"

They talked for another hour.

Richard Sanford completed his postgraduate work on schedule, but he did not seek employment in the electronics field. Professor Bloch regretted losing contact with Long during the summer vacation, but welcomed him back for further study in September.

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It was almost Thanksgiving before the next significant conversation took place between Professor Bloch and Richard Sanford, and it occurred far from the scene of their previous encounters.

They met, seemingly by accident, in the cocktail lounge at Chicago International Airport. Sanford was at the bar when the psychologist strolled in, carrying a brief case. The younger man rose, drink in hand, and offered a warm handclasp, which was accepted.

"Well!" Professor Bloch exclaimed ceremoniously. "Sanford! One does run into the oddest people at airports."

"It's been a long time, Doc," Sanford replied. "Buy you a drink?"

"I have just over half an hour. I'll take you up on that."

They chose a table near the windows overlooking the taxi area.

"You've heard about Jimmy Long, I suppose," the psychologist said.

"Read about it in the paper. A horrible way to go."

"Killed instantly, I understand, just the way he wanted it. Wrecked one end of the laboratory—they literally scraped him off the walls. I was away at the time, attending a psychological conference—actually lecturing to a group of colleagues when it happened."

The two men stared at each other over their drinks.

Bloch broke the silence. "Are you certain no one saw you?"

"Positive. Even Jimmy didn't believe it was me. Two hours later I was a hundred miles away."

"You did an excellent job. If I hadn't known, I too would have thought it was an accident. The insurance company was a bit troublesome at first, but when I showed them Long's case history they paid promptly—double indemnity in an accident, you remember."

The psychologist took a small flat package from his brief case. He laid the package on the table between them. "Your half," he said. "In twenties, as you requested."

"Thank you." Sanford slid the package closer. "Number eight," he said softly.

Bloch smiled. "How did my contacts in Chicago work out?" he inquired casually.

"Just fine. I'm working on ways to dispose of numbers nine and ten right now. Would you care to hear about it?"

"No, thank you. It's not my profession at all, you know. But I'll drink to yours."

They lifted their glasses.

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We welcome the first appearance of Dr. Jason Love in EQMM. The author has confessed to what he calls "a bit of Walter Mitty-ishness": Jason Love's initials are the same as his creator's. Love and Leasor, not surprisingly, served in the war in the same places, and also not surprisingly, the author's hobby is also cars. Love drives a white 812 supercharged Cord roadster, and Leasor has three Jaguars, an Mk 11 3.4 sedan, an XK 140 drophead coupe (one of the few SS 100's left, according to the author), and what may be the very last supercharged Cord Sportsman roadster still extant.

The author's own Cord was used in the film based on his book titled PASSPORT TO OBLIVION, *released as "Where the Spies Are," starring David Niven. In April 1966 the sequel to* PASSPORT *was published—* SPYLIGHT, *also featuring Dr. Jason Love, his supercharged Cord, and his flair for unearthing crime and detecting criminals . . .*

THE SEVENTY-SIXTH FACE

by JAMES LEASOR

OUTSIDE, IN THE CHATEAU GARdens, the fountains threw patriotic arms of red, white, and blue, Holland's national colors, sixty feet nearer the dark of the sky. The changing breeze blew a faint spray on Dr. Jason Love's face as he sat on the terrace. The scent of pine trees lay sweet on the midnight air.

This was his first visit to Holland; the luxury of this chateau converted into a country hotel impressed him. Its barbered lawns, striped awnings, the richness of waxed Dutch furniture provided an unexpected obverse to the anticipated trinity of tulip fields, windmills, and canals.

He glanced at Angela across the white wrought-iron table. Was this different from the clog-image she had also absorbed at school? But then, Max's daughter was barely nineteen. At that age one knew everyone and everything; the only unknown experience was death, and that lay far away.

The band changed tempo. The beat of *Amapola,* a song half forgotten, half unforgettable, spun his mind back across the years to another night, when he had heard it first with Angela's father, a wartime surgeon with the U.S. Army Air Force in Calcutta, flying on the hump run to Chungking.

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The song completed the circle, for Angela, Dr. Love's god-daughter, was on a two-week tour of European capitals with a party from her college. And Love, on his way back to his Somerset practice from an early holiday in Antibes, had driven north to Amsterdam to meet her. The moonlight glittered on his white 812 supercharged Cord roadster under the trees; like the song it was a beautiful anachronism of the nineteen thirties.

This was Angela's last evening; she was all but on her way.

Love hated goodbyes. He recalled the parting words, before he left for France, of Colonel Douglas MacGillivray, deputy head of M16, the British Overseas Intelligence network for which Love sometimes acted as an amateur agent. They had been talking in the back room of the travel agency off the Edgware Road, through which Love has booked his tickets, but which existed primarily as a convenient cover for Intelligence activities, for constant overseas telegrams, departures, and arrivals at unlikely hours.

He still had in his jacket pocket the slim aluminum cigarette lighter that MacGillivray had placed on the desk between them.

"One of our newest electronic gadgets, Doctor," the Colonel had announced proudly. "Helps us to cut down on manpower—and on risks. Observe how the business of spying is changing.

"To save sending a man over the Wall, for instance, we tapped East German underground telephone cables. But someone talked, and the scheme was blown.

"The electronic boys thought again and produced a scheme to transmit messages over the Wall along an infrared beam. Then someone else decided that this could be deflected, so we substituted the laser—a brief flash of light and the message was finished, received, understood. Over and out.

"The changes made us realize how old-fashioned we were in other ways. Have you ever thought, Doctor, that between this century's two key assassinations—at Sarajevo in 1914 and at Dallas in 1963—the world's seen more scientific progress than possibly over the previous five hundred years; yet the means—the bullet—was precisely the same?

"Now this side of the business is also coming up-to-date—and rapidly. When De Gaulle visited Ste-Hermine in Vendée province in France this spring, for example, O.A.S. extremists planned to murder him from a distance. The killer would be a hundred yards away with a tiny gadget in his pocket like the one I've got here. Nothing to link him with the killing at all.

"It's a midget transmitter that could explode by radio a bomb hidden inside an ornamental vase near the General. Luckily, someone talked, so the plan never went into action.

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"But it set the scientific wallahs thinking, and they've worked out some ingenious variations on the theme.

"Anyhow, have this set for free. You could adapt it to open your garage doors from a distance if you wanted—it can be tuned to any VHF wave band.

"Where are you off to? France and Holland? Well, we'll set it to the Dutch police wavelength—I don't know the French frequency; it's just been changed."

MacGillivray turned a tiny screwhead in the base with the point of a nail file.

"There. That should bring a policeman along in double time if you break down in that old Cord of yours. It'll send out a constant signal on their emergency wave band until you switch it off. So."

"Anything happening in your line in Holland?" Dr. Love asked dutifully, as he slipped the lighter-radio into his pocket.

MacGillivray shrugged evasively.

"Not much, but there's been a bit of commotion elsewhere, although it's more Interpol stuff than ours.

"Fellow got away with fifty thousand pounds worth of diamonds in Cannes last week. Week before that, roughly the same amount of sparklers was stolen in Rome. Week before that, Athens.

"Each time the women who'd lost the stuff were dining out. Expect their husbands will have a job charging *that* up to expenses . . ."

Expenses. The word was a helm to turn Love's thoughts back to the present. The bill; he should ask for it soon. As he glanced around for a waiter, the band played a fanfare, all horns, dessert music. A compere wearing a nightclub tan, a white tuxedo, held up both hands.

"And now, ladies and gentlemen," he said, first in English, then in French and in Dutch, "we proudly present to you, for this evening only, the greatest illusionist in Europe. He leaves Amsterdam tonight on a tour of the United States.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I give you—Turkoman."

A roll of drums as he gave them Turkoman. The name seemed faintly familiar; then Love remembered. He had seen him billed during the previous week at one of the open-air clubs on the coast road between Nice and Cannes.

A thickly built man with hair black as a raven's wing, a flat Slavonic face, stepped through the French doors onto the terrace. A spotlight flickered from the roof and held him. Turkoman raised both hands above his head. From the left sleeve of his dinner jacket he pulled first one pigeon, then a second, a third. They spread soft white wings and were gone.

A waiter hovered near Love's table, an attendant spirit on the edge of darkness. Love ordered two more Bacardi-and-limes and the bill, the *doloroso*. The horns blew another chord.

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"Now, a volunteer," called Turkoman. "You, sir? No, not *you,* sir. The gentleman behind you."

A thick-necked Dutchman came forward reluctantly, tugging down the sides of his jacket. Turkoman shook his hand, and then, half turning to the audience, produced the Dutch flag from the Dutchman's pocket, a gramophone record from inside his jacket, a pack of cards from behind his right ear. Applause came up in a roar.

The Dutchman stood sweating in the light, slightly fuddled with wine. He turned to reach the safe anonymity of his table.

"Just one moment, sir," Turkoman called after him. "Your wallet . . . your watch . . . and your driving license."

The Dutchman patted his pockets, bemused. How the devil did the fellow do it? More clapping as Turkoman handed these belongings back to him.

"One last thing," he said. "A letter."

The square of envelope gleamed in the spotlight. The Dutchman grabbed it thankfully and retreated to the merciful darkness.

Turkoman invited more people out to join him: a bald Frenchman wearing a blue mohair suit, an English honeymoon couple, a German woman with her hair in a tight bun.

"Wish he'd choose me," said Angela suddenly.

"Well, stand up. He's almost bound to if he sees you."

"You think so?" She pushed back her chair tentatively.

Turkoman's sharp eyes saw the movement beyond the rim of the spotlight.

"Voilà!" he cried, and waved a greeting to her.

"You are American, yes?"

"Yes. From Santa Barbara."

"Well, because you are you, and because I'm also flying to America tonight—I open in New York on Monday—here is a small present. Sweets for the sweet."

He shook her hand; somehow a huge, circular box of chocolates materialized. From Angela's sleeve he pulled a long red ribbon, wound it round and round the box, tied a big bow, handed the box of chocolates to her. The applause came up again.

Angela was halfway back to Love's table when a shout of anger came from across the terrace.

"That letter—it's gone. I've only got the envelope."

Turkoman's first guest was standing up, his face red with annoyance, confusion.

The manager emerged from the gloom, washing his hands without water, ready with his instant appeasement kit of soft words, a look of concern.

"Perhaps you dropped it, sir? We all saw you receive it back."

Heads nodded: yes, they had all seen that clearly. The Dutchman sat down, baffled, scratching his head. Maybe it had fallen out of the

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envelope on the way to the Men's Room? If only he hadn't drunk so much . . . he began to search through his other pockets.

Turkoman bowed to a last roar of applause and then walked off the terrace. The band struck up a let-kiss; couples straggled back to the dance floor.

Angela said regretfully, "Guess we'll have to go soon, Doctor. It's certainly been a beautiful evening. But I wish these Dutch cooks used a bit more garlic."

"Me, too. France spoils you for plain fare. Well, I'll settle up. It won't take an hour to reach Schiphol in the Cord."

"Cord? Are you by any chance the owner of that lovely roadster parked out under the pines?" Turkoman had come from the side of the chateau; he was at a table near them, smiling, a glass in his hand.

"The same," Love said.

"Haven't seen one in years," Turkoman went on. "Could I possibly cadge a ride in it to the airport —if you're taking the young lady?"

"Surely," said Love. "You're only doing a short season here?"

"Yes, six nights."

"You were in the south of France last week," said Love, batting back the conversation. "I saw your name on a poster."

"Ah, yes. And before that I was in Rome."

He seemed pleased to be so international.

The band started again: *Auld Lang Syne*. But even old acquaintance would be forgot eventually; everything was.

Turkoman said, "I'll collect my overnight bag—my main kit's gone ahead already. Be right with you both."

He finished his drink, walked rapidly toward the chateau. Love signaled to the waiter. Who was the man who said he had lost a letter? The waiter whispered his identity; a five-guilder piece reflected the moon.

Love guided Angela toward the car. Holland this week. France last, and Rome before that. A wheel began to turn in Love's mind; a name on a poster, a stay in two cities.

Love held the box of chocolates as Angela climbed into the Cord. He slipped off the ribbon, opened the box, offered it to her. On impulse he untied the bow in the ribbon. Inside a knot was a piece of paper, folded over several times. He slipped it into his pocket.

"Quite finished?" asked Angela. "What's that, anyway—a lucky message?"

"We'll both know soon. Now, here's our companion. Wait till I raise the subject. Okay?"

"Okay." Love squeezed her hand.

Turkoman climbed in beside Angela, shut the door. Love turned the ignition key against the Startix; the eight-cylinder Lycoming engine rumbled into life. On the main road the wind combed their hair

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close to their heads. The air felt fresh and damp; no place in Holland was far from the sea.

When Love saw the signpost—*Amsterdam 40 km.*—he turned to Turkoman.

"Tell me," he said easily, "What did you do with that man's letter?"

"What do you mean?" asked Turkoman, surprised.

In the green glow of the dash lights Love saw Turkoman's eyes narrow. A shadow touched his face and was gone; perhaps it was only the shadow of a tree against the moon?

"You know exactly what I mean. And you think it's still in the ribbon. But it's not. It's here."

As he spoke he took the paper from his pocket, unfolded it. Glittering splinters cascaded onto Angela's lap, each bright as the eyes of a woman in love.

"Diamonds," she breathed in amazement. "But, Doctor?"

"Give me those," said Turkoman roughly. He grabbed the stones.

"What interests me," said Love, "is how you've gotten away with it so easily so far."

Turkoman turned slightly in his seat. The dashlights glowed on the blued barrel of a .25 Star Starlet auto-loading pistol that had grown in his left hand.

"I don't give a damn what interests you, or the girl," he said sharply. "Keep both hands on the wheel. I'm getting out. I'll tell you when to stop."

Angela looked from one man to the other, but neither looked at her.

Love shrugged as though conceding defeat. He leaned gently against the arm rest of his door, felt the click of the tiny switch on MacGillivray's gadget.

Ahead, the road forked; a sign glowed luminously in their headlights. Love swung to the right down a side turning surfaced with red bricks.

"Why?" asked Turkoman suspiciously.

"Short cut."

They fled across metal bridges, above canals, through shuttered villages, out on the long raised road again, between fields where tulips slept, petals folded together like children's hands in prayer.

And then, far ahead, Love saw a faint blue light winking, and settled more easily into his seat. Two hundred yards; one hundred; fifty; the blue bulb flickered on the roof of a white Volkswagen police car.

"Looks like an accident," he said casually. The car had stopped halfway over the road, blocking it.

Turkoman leaned across Angela, dug the snout of the pistol against Love's stomach.

"Get through as quickly as you can," he said urgently. "And no tricks."

"But I'm a doctor," protested Love. "Maybe I can help."

As he spoke he trod the brake pedal savagely into the floor. The huge car slued from side to side.

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tires smoking on the rough brick surface.

Instinctively, Angela ducked. The movement deflected Turkoman's arm. Love, flicking his left hand out across her bent back, caught Turkoman's throat with the edge of his palm. The illusionist dropped the gun, sagged forward dizzily, gasping for breath. The Cord stopped.

Love heard the frenzied crackle of static on the police car radio, one call sign repeated and repeated. He switched off MacGillivray's gadget. The chattering died. Policemen in blue overcoats, with strange hats, black belts, filled the silence.

"Diamonds," Love said to the Lieutenant. "You'll find them in his pocket. Loose."

"Yes?"

A Sergeant scooped them from Turkoman's jacket, said something to the Lieutenant. Two policemen opened the door, pulled Turkoman out, led him to a blue police van parked off the road. He did not look back.

Love lifted the box of chocolates from Angela's lap, opened it, prodded at the array of soft centers. But they only contained soft centers, nothing else. Was he completely wrong? Then he took the lid, ripped off the padded, maroon silk, the soft quilting underneath. Stuck to the cardboard were three pieces of sticking plaster. He lifted one. For the second time that night, diamonds glittered in the car.

"Who are you, and how is it that you are apparently able to send out a radio signal on our police wavelength?" the officer asked curiously, watching him.

"Later," replied Love. "I think you'll find that these are the diamonds stolen in Cannes and Rome and Athens."

"We'll check them with their descriptions back at the station. In the meantime we'll need a statement."

"By all means. Ride with me to the airport. This young lady has a plane to catch."

He started the Cord, drove back toward the main road. The night was very still; the moon had put on a halo of cloud, and even the stars were dark.

"I'm a doctor," Love told the Lieutenant. "And thus little things are often important things. I heard there had been three robberies in three different places, and I'd seen Turkoman's name on a poster in one of them. He told me he'd been to one of the others. So two bits of a jigsaw fitted.

"When I found out from a waiter that the man whom Turkoman asked to help out with his act tonight was senior partner in one of Amsterdam's biggest diamond firms, the third dropped into place.

"These diamond men carry stones worth a fortune wrapped up in a twist of paper. Turkoman could easily remove this from the envelope—as easily as taking a diamond ring necklace from a woman.

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"He'd concealed the stones he'd stolen elsewhere in the chocolate-box lid, but he hadn't time for this tonight; so he tied them up in the ribbon and wound that around the box.

"He'd guessed he'd be searched at Schiphol airport pretty thoroughly—that diamond dealer would almost certainly tell the police or Customs what had happened. So Turkoman needed a carrier—someone whose luggage wouldn't be suspected at all. And who better than one of a party of American college girls, carrying a box of chocolates and lots of happy memories about the Zuider Zee?

"As soon as she reached New York and was through the Customs, he'd get them back. Q.E.D."

"Ah, yes. No doubt. And your name and address here in Holland, please?"

"Dr. Jason Love. The Amstel Hotel, Amsterdam. Here's my passport if it's necessary."

"It won't be. If you could drop me at the nearest police station—I'll direct you—we'll telephone you at your hotel tomorrow for an official statement. I don't wish to delay you further since your friend has a plane to catch."

Love stopped the car outside a flat-roofed building. The Lieutenant got out, saluted, went inside.

"It all sounds simple, the way you tell it," said Angela, when they were on their way again. "But what gave you the first hint?"

"What I call the seventy-sixth face."

"And what's that?"

"A cut diamond has seventy-five sides or facets. The seventy-sixth face belongs to its owner. This shows pride of possession; sometimes alarm; usually acquisitiveness. I saw all three on Turkoman's face."

"Oh." Then softly: "I wonder what you saw in mine?"

Love told her.

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

This is the 311th "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . an interesting story, on more than one level, and one of the interesting things is that the author is himself a minister . . .

The Rev. Norman E. Douglas has been a Methodist minister for 24 years. He has been "a long time fan of mystery stories," and has "especially enjoyed the rather short ones"; and now he has written one of his own.

The Rev. Douglas is married, has two sons, one (at the time of this writing) serving in the U.S. Air Force, the other a senior in high school. The Douglas family are "avid campers and have a 16-foot travel trailer." The Rev. Douglas is also an "enthusiast for cars, especially foreign and sports cars."

So far as we can remember, this is the first story submitted to EQMM by a minister, although you will recall that we did have one from a nun. Is there a possible trend in the making? We'd welcome it!

THE WASHING MACHINE

by the REV. NORMAN E. DOUGLAS

OH, YES, I KNOW. IT IS ALWAYS news when a minister gets into trouble. And your papers are clamoring for the details. Well, I guess I might as well tell you the whole story as have you guessing about it. Only you must let me tell it my own way, from the beginning, so it's straight.

What? Oh, yes. I am—or was—assistant pastor at Dr. Evans' church. The famous Dr. Evans—renowned preacher, popular speaker, and prominent church leader. Well, you don't know Dr. Evans unless you've worked for him. Not with him, but under him—as I have for the past four years.

Dr. Evans' church is the largest in our state—largest in number of members and one of the wealthiest churches in this end of the state. And I came to it as assistant pastor, fresh out of seminary. All my classmates envied me. "Boy, are you lucky! Assistant to the great Dr. Evans! Wish we had a chance to start like that!" How little they knew! Neither did I—but I learned.

We came here four years ago, my wife and baby and I, for $3600 a

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year and a house. Only there was no parsonage for the assistant, so the Board found us an apartment —four remodeled rooms upstairs with Miss Grace Arthur. She's a loyal member of the church, and a devotee of Dr. Evans. Every time we came in or went out we had to go through her sitting room. And believe me, she kept track of when we came and when we left—and when the baby cried, and when Vera, my wife, was out of sorts, and when we had friends in, and who they were, and what time we went to bed and what time we got up. And what she didn't know, she asked about. More than once Dr. Evans has asked me about something, and I knew he got the information from her. It couldn't have come from anyone else.

And the furniture! Have you seen where we lived? Stuff that belonged to Miss Arthur's father and mother—maybe to her grandparents. Or castoffs from Dr. Evans' parsonage or parishioners' homes. "There's a lot of good use in that yet," we'd be told. And that old washing machine—I think it must have been with Noah in the Ark. Poor Vera! You know how much washing a baby makes; and then she had to fight with that old machine. Two years ago, when the second baby came, it broke down. I hoped maybe we could get a new one, but they found a handyman who tinkered it up to run a little longer, and it's still there.

But worst of all was my work. I had hoped I would have the opportunity to really learn so much. But Dr. Evans doesn't want an assistant, he wants an errand boy. Run here, go there, do this, fix up that. And if anything you do succeeds, he wants all the credit. I began working with the Youth Fellowship—the teen-agers, you know. We began to have a good group coming to the meetings. They were discussing vital topics, and really learning things about the world and life. And when we had over fifty kids attending every Sunday night, Dr. Evans took it over, and sent me out to hold a service in the Old Ladies' Wheelchair Home.

It was the same with the Sunday evening preaching service. For a long time this had been a sop to a few old ladies and men who still had some old-fashioned ideas. This was good enough preaching for the assistant. Well, we worked hard on it. The teen-agers from the Youth Fellowship formed a choir. We made calls to all the rooming houses in the neighborhood and got acquainted with the people. Many of them were night-shift workers, and hadn't been in church for years. Quite a few of them began to come to our Sunday nights. And then a teen-age crowd drifted in out of curiosity and stayed to listen. Well, when that service grew large, Dr. Evans took over the Sunday night preaching and the youth choir.

I watched the same thing happen

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to everything else I did. The Young Married Couples Club, the Golden Agers, the Men's Club—all of them. I felt as if I were beating my head against a brick wall. Why didn't I leave? Humph, you don't know much about this sort of thing, do you? It would be a brave Church or Board that would extend a "call" to one of Dr. Evans' boys until the good Doctor was through with him.

It all came to a head during our vacation this year. Dr. Evans is given the months of July and August for his vacation. This year he and his wife went to Europe during July and spent August at their summer home in Maine. I got the first two weeks in September as my vacation. I took Vera and the kids to Pennsylvania to visit her folks. You've seen that beat-up old Austin I drive—the police have it now. I've had it ever since I began in seminary, and it takes a lot of tinkering and fixing on my part to keep it running. It wasn't up to any long trip, even if we could have afforded one. But on $3600 a year the only vacation we can afford is to go and freeload on relatives.

Anyway, I took the family to Pennsylvania for the two weeks I had off; and Vera's folks wanted her to stay longer, so I left her and the children for a couple of weeks more, and came back to the apartment alone. It was then that it happened.

The first Monday I was home I decided to do a little washing for myself. After battling the usual mechanical troubles, I got the old washer working, and I had just put in a second load of clothes when the drain cock broke right off. Apparently it had finally corroded clear through. I had a frantic half hour with a mop and pail before the mess was all cleaned up, and I suppose I lost my head. Anyhow, I called the Chairman of the Board at his office in Hartleigh Towers. I told him we just had to have a new washing machine right away, that I couldn't ask Vera to put up with so much annoyance and inconvenience—and more in the same vein.

It was about an hour later that I got a telephone call from Dr. Evans. His voice was that of a pained father dealing with a prodigal son. I had been very unwise to call the Chairman of the Board at his office and interrupt his business day. I had been too emotional and too demanding in my conversation. Didn't I realize that the call to the ministry was a call to "service"? We had to be ready to face sacrifices in serving the church. Even though his "call" was for only a little over $10,000 per year, he wouldn't think of making a "demand" of the Board; he had found that whenever he had made a "suggestion" it had always been carried out. The Board was to meet next week, and he was sure that something satisfactory could be worked out. Anyway, I should remember that "it was all for service!"

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The Board met on Tuesday evening, and I was to leave to get Vera and the children on Wednesday night. After the briefest of discussions about the washing machine, Dr. Evans suggested that Mr. Mason, the Fix-It man, be asked to come in at his convenience and patch the drain cock back in place. In the meantime I could probably make do with a cork or rubber stopper. The motion was put, seconded, and pass unanimously.

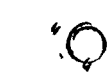
Wednesday afternoon I spent an hour getting my Austin jalopy ready for the trip to Pennsylvania. I had to clean the carburetor, so I had the hood up; and I noticed that steel box on the fire-wall next to the battery. It held the works of the car radio—you could see the tubes through the ventilating holes; and there was a metal cover held on with four screws. I knew that under that cover was a space about four or five inches deep with a welded-in steel plate for a floor. I had tried to get at the radio works that way once a long time ago, when I still had hopes of making the radio play. I made a vow then and there that Vera would have a new washing machine, no matter what.

I ran up to the apartment and got a dozen large size envelopes. I typed them all, addressing them to myself at the office of the church. I also dug back in the desk drawer where I had hidden that little nickel-plated revolver I had kept when I helped settle up my Uncle Theodore's estate. I put stamps on the envelopes, wrapped them and the revolver in some clean rags, and screwed them in under the steel cover above the radio works.

I suppose it was the minister in me that made me hold up only liquor stores. I had seen too much of what that stuff had done to human lives in the neighborhood; and I felt like the avenging angel every time I stuck one up.

Altogether I hit eight of them—five this side of the state line and three after I got over into Pennsylvania. After each one I would seal the money in an envelope and drop it in the next mail box I came to. I was stopped only once by police, and they didn't search the car, just looked in. They wouldn't have found my gun though. Even the police here didn't find it until I told them where to look.

Both the city and state police were there waiting for me when I got Vera and the kids back to the apartment on Saturday morning. The amounts of money tallied exactly with each one of the eight holdups; and it would have done me no good to deny anything. I had known that Dr. Evans was jealous of me; but I had never suspected him of opening my mail.



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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

This is the 312th "first story" to be published in Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . a simple, straightforward "crime story," cleanly and clearly conceived, cleanly and clearly executed, with a flick of whiplash at the end . . .

The author, John Pick, is in his early thirties, married, and has two children. He was born and raised in the hard-coal region of Pennsylvania. Professionally, he is a forester (perhaps the first forester ever to be published by EQMM). Since his graduation from North Carolina State College and two years in the army and an odd job here and there, Mr. Pick has been with the Forest Service of the U.S.D.A.

In college he was a staff writer-artist, and finally the editor, of the School of Forestry's yearbook, and more recently he has written newspaper columns on conservation and tree care. Now he has turned to fiction ("I just couldn't get excited about dealing with facts," he wrote to us), and surely it's a long, long way from tree care to safe-cracking—for which we admire Mr. Pick all the more!

THEY SAID IT COULDN'T BE DONE

by JOHN PICK

A CHILL WIND EDDIED IN THE ALLEY where Tony Lepola stood waiting, forcing him to shiver involuntarily. He drew the shabby leather windbreaker tighter around his shoulders and hunched closer to the brick wall in a futile effort to keep warm. He wanted a cigarette badly, but he knew that the one thing he could not do now was to reveal his hiding place.

Lifting his head, he glanced once again across the street to the object of his vigil—The Idle Hour Cocktail Lounge. He wished that chubby old Ed Goldy would close the hell up and go home. It must be at least fifteen minutes past closing time already, and obviously some last-minute drinkers apparently just wouldn't give up.

But Tony knew they couldn't stay much longer. Goldy didn't take chances with the liquor control laws—once legal closing time showed on the clock, the bar was shut tight. That was one of the things Tony had learned when he was casing the place. True, Ed did allow his good customers to buy

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one more round before he corked the bottles—but how long could one drink be nursed?

To kill time, Tony once more ran over his plan. After Goldy left, Tony would move right in; there was no need to wait, because in the three nights he'd watched before, Goldy had never come back. Tony would go directly to the rear of the building and crawl in the window of the Men's Room. He had checked the window tonight before leaving the bar and it was still unlatched. He had first unlatched it about a week ago as a test, not really thinking it would stay unlatched. But it had.

He hadn't thought it would be that easy to get into the place. He was sure Goldy would discover the open window on some last-minute check, but apparently the owner never took such precautions. And there were no burglar alarms—Goldy just didn't go for them. Tony hadn't believed the boys when they told him that, so he had investigated thoroughly and found it was true.

Frowning, Tony gave his head a quick shake as he thought about how odd some of this was. Goldy's apparent laxity had given Tony a few bad moments. The guy puzzled him; he was so damn cocky that he just had to have something up his sleeve. But if he did, Tony hadn't been able to find out what it was in all the time he'd spent setting the job up. He shrugged, dismissing the notion. He was now convinced that the very carelessness of Goldy's attitude was what had spooked the rest of the boys. But it was all a big bluff.

Tony chuckled out loud. The boys had been unanimous in warning him to stay clear of the place, but they couldn't give him any good reasons. They just claimed the place was jinxed, that it couldn't be cracked. But to support their claim all they would say was that two attempts had been made before and both had failed. But those jobs had been tried years ago and Tony had known the guys who made them. They were rank amateurs compared to him.

Besides, it rankled Tony that the boys considered him only a second-rater. Sure, he was a good enough back-up man on a team job, but when he talked about doing a big-time job on his own, all he got was a big horse laugh.

Well, after tonight they wouldn't laugh. Tony couldn't see how anything could go wrong. He had worked it out from every possible angle and he just couldn't understand why it hadn't succeeded before. It was such a sweet and simple set-up. The place was wide open. He smiled. No, after tonight they wouldn't laugh. Not only would he have cracked a place they all said was uncrackable, he also figured he'd come out at least two G's richer.

That was why the job had to be

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done tonight. Goldy, in addition to his careless attitude toward security, had some funny ways about money. Tony had learned (maybe it was only a rumor, a sort of legend that went with the jinx?) that the whole week's take was left in the bar safe over the week-end. Goldy only went to the bank once a week and that was on Monday. So tonight, Saturday—actually Sunday morning—the whole week's cash would be in the safe. To make it even better, the week had been a real fat one for Goldy, especially last night and tonight—he had really packed them in. And by doing the job tonight, the loss would remain undetected until Monday.

As that thought occurred to him, Tony felt a little disappointed; the boys would have to wait till Monday before they learned about his success. Actually he had no intention of telling them anyhow; they'd know he had done it and they could come to him about it.

There was a loud creaking noise from across the street followed by shouts and laughter. Tony instantly stiffened and his senses became as keen as those of an animal on the prowl. The Lounge door was opening. From behind it he could now hear drunken giggles as the people who had been holding him up started to come out. The door opened fully and Tony could see into the dim interior. Goldy was in the center, behind the long bar. Tony could hear his booming voice clearly as he made his farewells.

The people came out, two men and two women, talking loudly and swaying slightly. One of the women gave a little shriek and remarked in a high voice how cold it had become. Then she wrapped herself around one of the men who slapped her on the backside. She squealed and all four laughed. They went directly to their car and as it pulled away, Tony hugged the wall to avoid the headlights. The car drove off with a loud screech of tires. He heard the tires again a block away as the car cornered, and then it was quiet again.

Tony turned once more toward the Lounge. Inside, the lights were still on and he could see a shadow moving across the walls as Goldy finished cleaning up. Afrer what seemed an agonizingly long time, the lights went out and in a few seconds the door opened. Goldy came out, locked the door, and waddled around the building toward his car.

Tony felt a sudden tide of excitement rise in him, the tingling feeling he always got when he was about to move in on a job. It was a good feeling, one he liked to have, and it always sharpened his senses. He heard a car start behind the building and then Goldy drove out.

As soon as Goldy's car was out of sight, Tony went into action. He pulled off the gloves he had worn

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for warmth and replaced them with the thin nylon ones he used for work. He bent down to pick up his tool kit and after a quick glance in both directions, hurried across the street.

He went directly to the window of the Men's Room in the rear. The building was L-shaped and the Men's Room was at the end of the extension. Just around the corner of the Men's Room, in the main part of the building, was the back door. That was where Tony planned to come out.

He felt a surge of relief when the window opened almost noiselessly. That was a good sign. He pulled a piece of rope from his jacket and tied it to the handle of his tool box, then pushed the box through the window and lowered it carefully to the floor. When he felt it land, he threw the rope inside. After a quick glance around, he reached up, grabbed the sill, and heaved himself up. In seconds he was inside on the floor, panting softly from the effort. Maybe he was getting a little old for this kind of work, but at least after tonight he could afford to take a vacation. Maybe—just maybe—he'd even be able to go south for the winter and get away from this cold for once.

He picked up his tool kit and stood there quietly, listening. He couldn't hear a sound except a tiny dribbling noise from the toilet. He stepped toward the door, then stopped abruptly, cursing himself for being so careless. He turned and with his free hand closed the window.

He opened the door and stepped out. The slight squeaking sound the door made didn't bother him, but the loud thump with which it closed was so unexpected that he was startled. It had never sounded that loud to him before; but then he had never been there when it was empty. He stood still for a moment, his back to the closed door, breathing deeply to calm himself down. His heart sounded like a pneumatic drill and he knew that he was starting to get the jitters. He had to get moving.

The Men's Room was at the end of a narrow corridor, so he turned and walked out to where the corridor opened into the main part of the building—the bar and lounge area. There he stopped again, shocked at the utter blackness he looked into. He wished he'd taken a little more trouble to learn the exact contents of this area, but he had expected at least a night light. Except for the barely perceptible light coming through the front windows —from a street lamp—the place was pitch-black. A clock above the bar glowed a soft blue but it added no real illumination to the room. The air reeked of stale tobacco and alcohol.

Tony blinked, trying to adjust his eyes to the darkness and at the same time trying to remember the exact location of the furniture that lay be-

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tween him and the bar. He knew where the bar was—a black mass almost directly in the center of the room about twenty-five feet away. He knew where the small stage was—off to the left in the far corner. What worried him was the forest of chairs and tables between him and the bar. He would have to negotiate them twice—once to get to the safe and once to return to the back door, now to his left and around the corner. He glanced at the softly glowing clock and saw that it was 2:35.

Taking a deep breath, he stepped gingerly in the direction of the bar, one hand held in front of him to feel for obstacles. The ease with which he moved surprised him. He was only about ten feet from the bar when a car pulled up in the street, flooding the room with bright light. Almost blinded, he dropped to the floor, and in so doing, knocked over a table and several chairs with a resounding crash. The lights swept rapidly through the room, then were gone. He heard the car move off and it was dark again.

He realized then that he'd been holding his breath. He let it out with a whoosh. He didn't get up right away, though. His heart was beating loudly and for the first time all night he realized what it meant to work alone. It was never like this when he was working with one of the boys. Then neither felt scared because neither would admit to the other that he was scared. But it was different when you worked alone—he had to admit that now.

He stumbled to his feet, still breathing deeply, and groped for a chair to steady himself. Now he was driven by just one desire—to get the job over with. Moving quickly, he reached the bar and went inside, carefully lifting the gate so he would have a clear passage out if he had to leave in a hurry. The safe was to the right, so he went that way, stepping softly, feeling the confidence well up in him again now that the goal was so near. Then his box bumped into something made of glass and sent it clattering to the floor. He jumped and started to tremble violently.

Again he took deep breaths until he had calmed down. Then he went on to the safe and kneeled before it. By now his eyes had adjusted to the darkness, so he could see it quite clearly. This was the one object in the place he *had* made himself thoroughly familiar with. For five nights—not consecutive nights because he hadn't wanted to draw attention to himself—he had sat at that bar just in front of where he was now kneeling until he had memorized every square inch of the safe's face. He knew it would be an easy one; it was a common make, found often in bars and small business establishments. Though he was sure he could open it without tools, he had brought them anyhow just to play safe.

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Now, as his practiced hands moved across the smooth metal door, a smile flickered onto his lips. Then he frowned. His hand had brushed against something just above the handle, something thin and fine like a—yeah, like a spider web. But it wasn't there any more; he slid his hand lightly back and forth across the metal, but he couldn't feel it again.

Suddenly he stiffened. Intent on the face of the safe, he heard a tiny sound. But it too was gone. He listened sharply for a moment, but all he heard was the low-pitched hum of the bar's refrigerators. He shrugged; it hadn't been a suspicious sound anyway—nothing like a door being tried or a window being opened. And he knew there were no burglar alarms. So he went back to work.

In a few minutes the safe was open. He sat back to relax, sweating slightly, allowing himself the pleasure of anticipating all the money behind that door. He congratulated himself on the ease with which he had done it. His fingers and his ears were just as sensitive as ever. The tool kit lay unopened beside him; he hadn't even needed the stethoscope. The tumblers on this one were so worn they had sounded like billiard balls when they clicked into position.

Rubbing his hands and grinning, he turned the handle. As the door swung open, he flashed his shaded pen-light quickly inside and gasped. In the brief flash he had seen nothing but bundles of bills. Greedily he reached inside and pulled them out.

He almost laughed with joy as they tumbled to the floor. Pulling a canvas bag from his pocket, he scooped the bundles into it, counting roughly from the large numbers printed on the bands. When he was finished he had counted over $3500. He sat there stunned and delighted. Now for sure he could go south, maybe even to Mexico; it would last longer there. He had never expected a windfall like this; he had expected a good take, sure, but nothing as big as this.

Moving quickly and wanting to get out to begin enjoying his new wealth, he closed the safe door and spun the dial. Grasping the bag of cash in one hand and his tool box in the other, he stood up. He swayed slightly as he rose, almost losing his balance. His legs were stiff and cramped. He flexed them and stood on his toes a few times to loosen up and then started for the back door.

He was tremendously excited, almost ecstatic. It was almost over and so far without a hitch. He'd really given the boys something to talk about next week. They couldn't call him a second-rater any more, not after tonight. He moved back around the bar with ease, more confident now that the job was almost over and his eyes were completely adjusted to the dark.

As he was closing the bar gate, he

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glanced at the clock. It was 2:42. Seven minutes the job had taken him—just seven minutes. Well, that wasn't too bad; come to think of it, it was pretty good. Professional, in fact.

He worked his way swiftly through the maze of furniture and within seconds he stood with his hand on the knob of the back door. He paused for a moment, trying to recall if he'd left anything behind. Satisfied that he hadn't, he then listened. There wasn't a sound to be heard—except the low hum of the refrigerators in the bar area.

With a wide grin on his face he opened the door and stepped outside, wincing slightly at the impact of the cold. He closed the door behind him, then stood listening again. He turned to the right and walked off, almost able to feel the boys patting him on the back.

There was a scraping sound behind him, and he almost choked with fright when he felt a strong hand grasp his shoulder.

"Well, well," a familiar voice said as he was spun roughly around. "If it isn't my old friend—'Fingers' Lepola."

Tony stood there, feeling suddenly numb all over, facing Detective Sergeant Harry Webster of the city police. In dumb silence he watched as Webster flashed a light toward the alley behind the parking lot. He heard a car start up and then he was blinded by the glare of headlights as a police car pulled out into the open. It stopped beside them with a lurch.

"Come on, Fingers," Webster said. "Let's go down to headquarters and have us a little talk. Oh—and bring your baggage."

Somewhere in the Police section of the Municipal Building two men faced each other across a desk in a small room.

"Well, Mr. Goldy, they got him," said the tall gray-haired man behind the desk. "And I'd like to thank you again for all the help you've given us."

The big chubby man with the cigar in his mouth shrugged and waved his hand in a grandiloquent gesture. "It was nothing, Lieutenant," he said. "I just like to take care of my property. Actually, I owe you all the gratitude for the quick and effective action you took."

"That's our job," said the Lieutenant. Then he frowned. "Just one thing bothers me. How did you know there was someone in your place?"

The big man smiled broadly. "It's really quite simple," he said. "Every night before I leave, I take the telephone off the hook and dial my home number. But after I've dialed the last digit, I don't let the dial return to complete the call. Instead, I tie it in place with a loop of thread and the other end of the thread I attach to the handle of the safe." He paused. "When I got home tonight the phone was ringing."

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MRS. B.'s BLACK SHEEP

by PATRICK QUENTIN

(*Continued from page 54*)

Paul Merton was waiting in the hotel lobby, looking cool and distinguished in a dark-gray suit. She ran to him.

"Laura!" The warm smile faded from his eyes. "My dear, what's the matter?"

She gripped his hands. "Oh, Paul, Paul, thank heaven, you've come!"

They went together to Laura's room. Still shaking with terror, Laura threw herself into Paul's arms. "Oh, Paul, we were wrong, hopelessly wrong. It *is* someone on the Tour. They've just tried to murder me!"

She poured everything out, concluding, "Don't you see! Poor Rosa was killed by mistake for me. It was dark by the bridge. She was about my size. She was wearing my yellow slicker with the hood up over her head. Everyone knows that slicker's mine, and everyone knew I was going down that alley at six thirty to pick up the slippers."

Paul's arm was comfortingly around her. "Who do you mean by 'everyone'?"

"The girls and Nickie. They were all with me this morning when I left the slippers at the shop."

"Rosa might have had some enemy. It might have been a coincidence."

"But you don't believe it was, do you? Not really?"

"No, Laura, I'm afraid I don't." He led her gently to a sofa and sat down with her, holding her cold hands. "Can you stand talking about it now?"

"Of course I can."

"Then, were any of the girls out at the time Rosa was killed?"

"I don't know." She looked at him with sudden attention. "Kitty was. Just as I went out of the hotel she was coming in. But, Paul, it's absurd to suspect Kitty."

"Is it? You say she's very extravagant. You've only her word for it that it was her father who made her bring a copy of that bracelet with her. Maybe she's lying. Maybe she got into debt, sold the genuine emeralds, and had a copy made in Paris. Maybe Yvonne Delauny had something on her, and now she's terrified that you'll tell her parents the bracelet is fake and bring everything into the open."

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"No, Paul. I don't think it's that. Nothing's happened for seven days. If something like that was behind it, Kitty would have tried to do it earlier, wouldn't she? I've been safe until today. It must be tied up with something that happened today."

She thought of Nickie's and Holly's secret marriage. Then she thought of Count Foligny.

The thought must have come to Paul at the same moment. He said, "The Count."

"Yes, Paul."

"Did he know about your date to pick up the slippers?"

"He could have found out from Jennifer. Anyhow, he could easily have followed Rosa out of the hotel, thinking she was me. I was wearing the slicker when we met, today. The Count was always the most likely one . . . But *why,* Paul? Because he wants to marry Jennifer and thinks I stand in the way? He must know I'm no real obstacle. That's no motive."

"What if he was in the jewel racket with Yvonne Delauny?" Paul suggested. "Perhaps he tried to palm off the fake emerald bracelet on her as her part of the loot and she threatened to expose him to you. Remember, Laura, the murderer knows Yvonne Delauny talked to you at the table; he also knows you discovered Yvonne's body and took the bracelet back. He may think you have much more dangerous information about him than you actually have."

Yes, the Count hoping to marry an American heiress; Yvonne Delauny threatening to expose him to the heiress's chaperon as a jewel thief. It did fit.

Laura looked at Paul bleakly. "What do we do? I'm not going to the police. I can't possibly, now. I could never explain away everything I've done. Thank heaven, we leave for Capri tomorrow before they link up that slicker with me. Oh, Paul, what can I do?"

"You could give up the Tour."

"Give it up? It's my future. What would I do if I gave it up?"

He turned to look at her, very steadily. "You could marry me."

That didn't really take her by surprise, but the confusion and horror of the last hour had strained her almost to breaking point. Now she hardly understood the conflicting emotions that were warring in her.

"Paul, don't ask me. Please, not now. I'm so hopelessly tied up with this Tour. It's become a kind of challenge. I've never really made a success of anything, and now—well, all these setbacks have only made me more determined. I guess I'm just a steam roller with one fixed idea."

His lean face broke into a faint smile. "Okay, steam roller. We'll play it your way for the time being. The Tour goes on?"

"Yes."

"But you've no objection now if I come to Capri with you? The Embassy can spare me."

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"Of course not. Oh, Paul, you're such an angel!"

"Not an angel—a bodyguard. If the Count follows us now and tries to start something, he'll be very sorry."

The feeling of safety brought Laura a vividly contrasting picture of that limp, pitiful body lying on the bank of the canal. "Poor Rosa! If only—"

"Laura, my dear, you've got enough to worry about without 'if only's.' And, incidentally, those girls are over at the Lido waiting for their chaperon. If they start suspecting something, you've lost all you've gained. Whether we like it or not, we'd better get started for an evening of mad gaiety."

And that night, with Paul's help, Laura almost forgot she had been marked for death . . .

The first four days on Capri passed in miraculous serenity through lazy blue days and moonlit nights sweet with the smell of jasmine. Count Foligny, who now represented danger to Laura, had been left behind in Venice. Paul was with her. Holly and Nickie were discretion itself. Kitty, with her inevitable instinct, had collected just the right amount of just the right beaus.

Anne grew daily more self-confident and cheerful.

Laura's only worry was Jennifer, who, since their fight over Coco in Venice, had treated her with theatrical disdain and wrote mysterious letters which almost certainly were destined for the Count.

But so long as he was not there, he could more or less be put out of mind. Laura, whose weakness was always her optimism, began to believe that her troubles were over and concentrated on showing off the staggering beauties of the island.

On the afternoon of the fifth day, having bargained with the donkey-man to hire donkeys for a projected moonlight picnic at Tiberius' Palace that evening, Laura strolled through the quaint cobbled streets to the village's main Piazza. It was the hour when the funicular railway debouched into the square the passengers from the Naples boat, and the Piazza was bustling with new arrivals. The girls, who had been at the Blue Grotto and the beach with Paul, would be up any minute. Laura sat down to wait for them at one of the outdoor cafés.

She sat idly watching the crowd, when a voice said, "Good afternoon, Madame."

She looked up straight at Count Coco Foligny. He was smiling down at her almost with affection.

"It was most distressing, Madame, that business kept me a few days in Venice. I cannot tell you how I have missed the charming company of Madame Black's Tour. I may sit down?"

Taking her unnerved silence for consent, he pulled out the chair opposite her and seated himself. "I am

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glad for this opportunity to speak with you alone, Madame. You are a woman of the world and can certainly help me with a little problem —in ethics."

"Problem?" echoed Laura.

"Ah, it is all my own fault. I appreciate that, and you have every right to scold me. I speak, of course, about Mees Jennifer."

"About Jennifer?"

"You must believe me, Madame, that my intentions were of the most innocent. But I misunderstood the temperament of the American young. Always I imagine them to be like goddesses, infinitely unassailable. I meet your group. I find Mees Jennifer charming for a little flirt. This seems to me most natural. But what happens is most distressing."

He felt in his pocket and brought out two thick letters whose envelopes were plastered with airmail stamps. "The young lady is more susceptible than I think. She sends me these large, oh, so warm letters, revealing the grand passion. Very charmingly, she speaks of romance, of abandoning her parents, of fleeing with me."

His handsome mouth drooped at the corners. "You will realize my embarrassment, Madame, when I tell you that I am a happily married man. My dear wife has been for several weeks in Taormina. I am traveling through Italy to join her."

Staggered by this news, Laura was gazing at him in silence.

"Without doubt, Madame, you find me a very foolish man. I see now the error. For example, all that night at Les Caves in Paris I dance every dance with her, except for one delightful dance with you. That was excessive, was it not? It seems, without realizing it, I become the Don Juan."

He smiled again; this time the smile was disarming. "But, of course, I come now to Capri to make the explanations. Not for the world would I cause a young girl to suffer. She writes that tonight you have the picnic at the Palace of Tiberius. I think I come and make up some tender little foolishness so as not to wound her. 'Ah, dear Jennifer,' I say, 'if only I were younger . . . Always, my dear, I will cherish your memory, but, alas, duty calls to the good, kind wife.' "

He paused. "It is on this I need your advice, Madame. You think this the most delicate, the most gentlemanly approach?"

Hardly knowing what she said, Laura stammered, "Why, yes—yes, I imagine that's the way to do it."

The white teeth flashed. "And I have your forgiveness for my foolish antics?"

"Of course."

He jumped up and raised her hand to his lips, kissing it ardently. "The mature American female is one of the great phenomena of nature. Madame, I thank you deeply. And now I leave you so as not to take up more of your time."

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With a parting smile, he strolled away through the animated crowd.

Gradually Laura's dazed mind started to take in and absorb what the Count had told her. He was happily married. Then she had been hopelessly wrong. He was not a fortune hunter and had not the slightest desire to marry Jennifer. The motive which she and Paul had ascribed to him for the murder was nonexistent.

And not only that: on the night in Paris when Yvonne Delauny had been murdered, he had danced every dance at the night club with Jennifer, except for that one duty dance with Laura, herself. He was not the only one to say that. She remembered now that Jennifer had said the same thing.

If he had danced every dance with Jennifer, then he had had no chance of slipping away from Les Caves to kill Yvonny Delauny. That was certain.

Count Foligny could not possibly have murdered Yvonne Delauny. And so it was equally absurd to suppose he could have tried to murder Laura.

The picture was much darker and more confused now. If it was not the Count of whom she should be afraid, who was it?

Realization of the truth came to Laura with agonizing and relentless certainty.

In Venice she had decided that the Count was guilty because she had been unmolested until his arrival. But the Count had not been the only person who had arrived unexpectedly that day.

Laura glanced unseeingly around the colorful little square, trying desperately to distract herself from the suspicion that was forming in her mind. It was ridiculous, wicked, to suspect Paul.

What if he had arrived in Venice just before Rosa was killed? What conceivable connection could there have been between Paul and Yvonne Delauny?

But, cruelly, there flashed into her mind a memory from which there was no escape, once it had come. Why, why hadn't she thought of it before it was so terribly late? The clue had been there from the start. Even before the murder Yvonne Delauny had tacitly told her the name of her murderer. She had shown her that crudely sketched portrait of a lean, distinguished man.

"This is my husband," she had said. "He cheated me and deserted me." Laura had known that Yvonne Delauny was a bad artist with no talent for likenesses. Why hadn't she realized before that the clumsy caricature had been an attempt at a portrait of Paul Merton?

Yvonne Delauny's husband! Once that link had been made, the complete chain gleamed derisively in Laura's mind. In Les Caves, Yvonne Delauny had been wearing a cheap gold wedding ring. Later, when Laura had found the body,

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the work-roughened fingers had been bare.

Now that its significance was immense, she remembered that tiny fact of which before she had been only dimly conscious. The ring had been taken and the bracelet had been left. Obviously—because the thing that Paul had tried desperately to conceal was the fact that Yvonne Delauny had been his wife.

That was the information which Laura had had all along without realizing it. That was the deadly information which made her far more dangerous to Paul Merton than a dozen policemen.

Suddenly the Piazza seemed full of laughter and cries of: "Hi, Mrs. B.! . . . Hello, Mrs. B.!"

All the girls, Nickie, and Paul Merton were crowding around her, pulling chairs up to the table, chattering about the forthcoming picnic.

With an extreme effort Laura managed to answer questions without having the faintest idea what had been asked or what she had replied. Now she could see the whole tawdry story as it must have been. In his early days in the foreign service Paul had made a dreadful marriage. Somehow he had managed to abandon his wife. But now that he had recently been transferred to an important position at the Paris Embassy, the wife had showed up again.

To a major diplomat a shady wife involved with a jewel ring would mean the certain end of his career. Yvonne Delauny had realized that, had certainly extorted money from him, and, when he could pay no more, had forced him to exploit his connection with Mrs. Black's Tours and steal Kitty's bracelet. Later, when she found out it was false, she had certainly demanded that he steal again. Paul, almost as certainly, had refused. That was when Yvonne Delauny had made use of Laura.

It was to Paul she had really been speaking when she showed the portrait sketches to Laura. By half telling the truth to Laura, she had been tormenting Paul, letting him know that if he did not do what she wanted him to do she would expose him as her husband. Either he had read the note over Laura's shoulder or Yvonne Delauny had told him earlier that she was going to ask Laura to her hotel room. The girl had not, of course, intended to tell Laura anything. It had been merely the final turn of the screw to make Paul come across.

But she had underestimated his desperation. He had gone round to the hotel and killed her before Laura arrived.

Laura understood now why the door had been ajar, and why the bracelet had been left by the body. Paul knew her terror of scandal. Of two great risks it was much safer to let her find the body, and thus become implicated, than to have her automatically call the police, as the

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note instructed, when Yvonne Delauny did not answer her knock.

And he had left the bracelet there because his main fear was that Laura might stumble on the real motive, which was so very nearly within her grasp. Knowing her, he could be sure that she would never leave the bracelet for the police. She might be puzzled as to why the murderer had left it there, but, puzzled or not, it would keep her thinking in terms of theft as the true motive of the crime. And without the extra knowledge of the marriage, a theft motive connected with Paul would have seemed preposterous.

"Laura, dear," his voice came to her now, "I hope you've prepared a Tiberian orgy for our picnic tonight."

She couldn't bring herself to look at him. She was overcome with shame at her own folly in believing him when he had said he still loved her. He hadn't seen her for 15 years, and she had been vain enough to believe that he had been waiting for her all that time.

She had run to him for protection right after he had sent her the Easter egg to scare her out of Paris. She had run to him for sympathy right after he had murdered Rosa by mistake at the canal.

Count Foligny had called Jennifer naïve. How vastly more naïve she had been, herself!

Suddenly she could no longer bear to be sitting there at the table. She was dimly conscious of Nickie rising and saying he had to go back to the hotel. She rose, too, hurriedly.

"Nickie, I'll go with you. I—I have to write some letters."

Clinging to his arm, she left the Piazza and started down the crooked, narrow street to the hotel. Through a haze, Nickie's voice came to her. "What's the matter, Mrs. B.? Aren't you feeling well?"

Her great desire to confide was checked by her sense of shame. Impulsively, she said, "Nickie, please promise me something. Don't let me out of your sight at the picnic."

"Of course, Mrs. B. But why?"

"I can't tell you. I— Oh, Nickie, we've been unspeakable foods. I know it now. I had the clue from the beginning at Les Caves."

She felt tears coming. Breaking away from him, she ran into the hotel.

Moonlight played over the little olive orchard. Above, even farther up the steep mountainside which plunged in sheer white-faced cliffs to the Mediterranean, loomed the vast, ruined hulk of Tiberius' Palace. At a short distance from the picnic party the hired donkeys, tethered to tree trunks, swished their tails patiently.

It was an enchanted evening to go with the tart Capri wine, the goat cheese, the romantically muted chatter and laughter of the girls and their boy friends.

But to Laura it was the most ter-

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rible ordeal of her life. Paul was sitting next to her on the soft, anemone-scattered grass. He had never left her side all evening. And now the picnic itself was over and the party was beginning to split up into wandering twosomes. Already Count Foligny had slipped away in the direction of the Bay of Naples to make his delicate "renunciation" scene with Jennifer. Kitty also had drifted off with a boy friend.

Paul's hand slid over Laura's. Its touch brought almost unendurable horror. "Since romance seems to be the order of the evening, my dear, how about a little stroll?"

Suddenly she was shaking. "No. No, thanks, Paul. I'd better stay here."

"Nonsense." He rose and pulled her up after him. "You've been the dutiful bellwether long enough."

To refuse again would only give him a hint that she suspected him. She looked wildly around for Nickie. He surely had been there a moment ago. But now there was no sign of him. Anne, however, was lying on her back under a tree.

Clutching at straws, Laura called, "Anne, come and explore the palace with Paul and me."

"Oh, I'd love to, Mrs. B." Anne jumped up.

Paul, in an irritated whisper, asked, "Why, in heaven's name, drag Anne along?"

"It's a shame to leave her alone," Laura whispered back. "Come along, Anne dear."

Paul was already moving toward the shadowy trail that wound up through the olive trees to the old entrance to the Palace. Slipping her arm through Anne's, Laura joined him. Reason told her that, with Anne there, nothing could happen; but reason could not banish her feeling of dread.

They reached the remains of the four great entrance columns and climbed the rough turfed ramp which led toward the ghostly walls and winding corridors of the ruined palace. The moonlight made grotesque black shadows beneath the walls. They came to a turn in the ramp and suddenly were in the musty darkness of the great dining-hall. With half-mocking relish Paul began to talk of the deeds of cruelty which were supposed to have been enacted there.

Anne clung closely to Laura, and when they had climbed crumbling stairs into a higher, even darker chamber, she gave a nervous laugh. "Oh, Mrs. B., it's stupid, but I'm scared." The words broke off into a little whimper. "I really am. It's so spooky. Let's go back."

To Laura this seemed her opportunity to escape from Paul. "All right, dear. Paul, take Anne back. I'll just walk on through. I'll join you in a minute."

To her immense relief Paul made no objection. He took Anne's arm, and the two of them disappeared behind her through the crooked corridors. Laura knew the palace

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well. She could climb one story higher to what had once been the roof and was now on a level with the top of the cliff. There she could emerge into the clear moonlight at the cliff's edge and, by skirting the orchard, drop down on the Bay of Naples side, where she would join the Count and Jennifer.

Cautiously she moved through the dark, cavelike chamber to another flight of steps and started up. Soon the stone steps changed to an iron stairway, which had been put in by the restoring archeologists. She emerged into moonlight on a little iron balcony which gave a view down to the ruin of the imperial stables below.

For a moment she stood there trying to calm her pounding heart. Below, in the shadows under the stable walls, something moved. She was sure of it. She tensed.

Again there was the suggestion of movement in the shadows, and then she made out a dim figure, standing now quite still, and facing toward the balcony.

She had been seen; she knew it. A fragmentary panic ran through her. Then, with a rush of confidence, she thought of Nickie. She might have known he would not let her down.

She bent over the iron balcony and called softly, "Nickie, is that you?"

At the sound of her voice the figure melted back into the shadows. Terror invaded her again. If it had been Nickie, he would have answered. It wasn't Nickie.

It was Paul come back.

She remembered that below her where the figure had disappeared was an entrance to the room beneath. He was right there under her. In any second he would be coming up the stairs.

The thud of a dislodged stone sounded behind her. Blindly she started to run up the iron stairway toward the palace roof.

As she reached the head of the stairs she could hear the footsteps clanging on iron behind her. Now she was in the full moonlight of the rocky meadow which stretched to the cliffs' edge. A minute before, moonlight had meant safety to her. Now it was her mortal enemy.

She looked wildly to left and right for cover. There was none. She started to run at random, zigzagging across the meadow.

The footsteps pounded behind her, relentless as a nightmare.

In a moment of dreadful clarity she knew that there was no escape. Suddenly she screamed.

She screamed again and again.

And as she screamed for the third time, it was as if a giant flying bat had struck her. She felt arms clutch around her, felt herself toppling to the ground with a heavy weight on top of her. She struggled, clawing and screaming . . .

Laura Black stirred in bed and opened her eyes to unexpected sun-

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light. Her head throbbed and her mind was confused.

A voice said, "So, Madame, you are awake?"

She turned her head with difficulty and saw Count Coco Foligny, astonishingly, seated by the bed, smiling at her.

"Do not be alarmed, Madame. You have received no serious injury. It is just that the doctor feels it best to keep you for some time under sedatives."

Memory came of terror and a dull sense of personal loss.

The Count laid an elegant hand on her arm. "Please, Madame. There is nothing to fear. When I heard your scream, I came running with a gun. He knew it was all up with him, then. He jumped over the cliff. He had, of course, been planning to throw you over the cliff and pretend it was an accident. It was a deplorable thing. But it is finished."

"But—" Laura managed.

The Count's smile was even broader. "Ah, Madame, you may dispel those worries, too. There will be no scandal for your Tour. I have some influence even here with the Italian police. It is all arranged neatly as an accident."

"Influence? With the police?"

"The sooner it is heard, the sooner it is forgiven." The Count's mouth dropped apologetically. "Deceptions are most ungentlemanly, Madame, and I am afraid I have been far from gentlemanly with you. But, unhappily, my profession is one of the cad. Permit me to present myself, Madame, as a minor representative of the Paris Sûreté."

Laura stared. "You—a policeman?"

"It is a long story, but fortunately no longer an unhappy one. You, Madame, and your charming, wealthy girls are more important than you realize. When you arrive in Paris, bristling, as one says, with jewels, I was assigned, as this chic Count Foligny, to keep watch over you. That was the beginning. How rapidly things progressed!

"I pose as the admirer of the charming Mess Jennifer and, almost at once, the bracelet is stolen, the very shady Yvonne Delauny connects herself with the group—the very shady Yvonne Delauny is murdered." He looked solicitous. "It does not pain you to listen?"

"No, no," said Laura. "Go on."

A guilty flush spread over the Count's face. "It is perhaps amusing for you, Madame, to know that it was you I suspected. You were seen to leave the Hotel Mireille; you were seen also to return to Les Caves. A policeman has to accept all possibilities, however shocking, and I accept the shocking suspicion that it is *you* who make contact between the jewel thieves and your wealthy American girls. I suspect it is *you* who kill Yvonne Delauny for some quarrel. Ah, my folly is immense.

"I follow the group to Venice, following you as the murderess. It is

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not until yesterday that I receive the wire from Paris which speaks of the marriage record and the true murderer."

He paused for a moment, then went on gravely, "You, of course, had reached the correct conclusion, had you not? You were more skillful than I. But you were rash, Madame, to go for moonlit walks with murderers."

The ache in her head dulled some of Laura's surprise at these revelations. But nothing could deaden for her the terrible sense of loss. It was perverse that she could still love Paul after the monstrous things he had done. But it was true.

And Paul was dead. Perhaps, in time, she could be resigned to that. But not yet.

"You were fond of him, Madame, naturally." Once again the Count's hand was on her arm. "If it is a little consolation, you can think of him as not entirely bad. I have a report of police interviews with Yvonne Delauny's associates in Paris. He genuinely thought her dead. There had been a bomb; she was listed among the victims.

"Since she had been tainted with collaboration, she was eager to cut herself away from her past and did not let him know she was still alive. When she reappeared in Paris to persecute him, it must have been a terrible shock."

"Don't!" broke in Laura. "Please, don't. Not now."

"Ah, yes," said the Count, in concern. "I am a crude nurse." He rose. "I will send someone more comforting."

He left the bedside. Laura did not really feel up to seeing any of the girls, but she hadn't the energy to call out. For a moment she lay feeling spent and miserably unhappy. Quiet footsteps sounded. She glanced up uninterestedly, and then gave a muffled gasp.

Paul Merton was standing smiling at her from the side of the bed. "Laura, dear, how do you feel?"

"Paul!"

He sat down. "Holly's being very brave. She told me about the marriage, but the other girls still don't know. She never wrote to her father. Nickie stopped her. So her parents need never know, either.

"Don't worry about her too much, my dear. She's young; the young are resilient, even when they think they're heartbroken. And, of course, she doesn't know the whole truth. She thinks it was an accident. So do the other girls. They all think you were screaming for help because you saw him fall."

Laura heard the words, but they had no meaning for her. There was nothing but the staggering fact that Paul was there, close to her, smiling at her.

Paul went on, "The Count has told me everything he knows, and I've been able to put the rest together. You'd guessed, hadn't you? The caricature of her husband, the missing wedding ring. You can see now

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why you were a menace to him from the beginning. You always had the facts; it was just a question of when you would put them together.

"Once you knew about his marriage to Holly, of course, you were ten times more dangerous, because it was his marriage to Holly, with all the millions that were going to come to her at twenty-one, which made the resurrected French wife someone who had to be killed. That's why the murder attempt on you in Venice came only after Holly had told you about the marriage."

It dawned on her then—the realization of the immensity of her error. She had put all the facts in their right place, but she had applied the facts, preposterously, to the wrong man.

When Yvonne Delauny had said, "This is my husband," there had been two sketches involved—the sketch of the distinguished man which she had exposed, and the sketch of Nickie which she had dropped on the table as she spoke.

The caricature of the distinguished man had not been a likeness of Paul at all; it had merely been a portrait of some irrelevant client. The significant sketch had been the one of Nickie!

It had been Nickie who had found his "dead" wife alive in Paris. Vividly, Laura could imagine the shock of his chance meeting with Yvonne Delauny, the admission, fatally blurted to her, that he was secretly remarried to an heiress—an admission which had put him in her power and compelled him to steal for the jewel ring, to murder Yvonne, and to try to murder Laura.

Every action she had attributed to Paul had, in fact, applied to Nickie.

"I've sent a cable to Nickie's parents, Laura. It's going to be bad for them, of course. But not unbearably bad. They can think it was an accident, too. That Count is a miraculously thoughtful policeman. He has promised to keep the truth out of the papers."

Remorse, grotesquely mingled with delight, was flooding through her.

Paul had taken her hand in his. "Laura, dear, there's one thing I can never forgive. How could you have been so stupid as to send me away with Anne and leave yourself alone to be attacked in the palace?"

She looked up at him. Suddenly she knew she would never be able to tell him she had suspected him. The irony of it, coupled with her weakness, brought a hysterical desire to laugh.

"Oh, Paul." She leaned forward into his arms. "Oh, Paul—dear Paul."

There was a tap at the door. His arm still around her, Paul called, "Come in."

Still feeling perilously near the edge of laughter, Laura saw Anne, Jennifer, and Kitty moving in phalanx toward the bed.

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Anne broke away from the others and, running to Laura's side, exclaimed, "Oh, Mrs. B., how are you? You *are* all right, aren't you?"

Kitty and Jennifer moved somewhat cautiously after her. They were both dressed with astonishing severity in tailored suits. Each wore only the faintest traces of lipstick and no other make-up.

Jennifer smiled shyly. "I know I've been pretty much of a drip about the Count and everything. From now on I'll try to grow up."

Kitty's round little eyes blinked solemnly. "And I promise never to be careless again, Mrs. B."

"This virtue overwhelms me." How sweet they all were! How very sweet! "And why, in the name of pity, are you got up like schoolmarms?"

"Jennifer and I are substitute chaperons and we want to give the right impression," announced Kitty sedately. "It's time to go to Naples to pick up the other girls."

"Heavens above, how long have I been asleep? Is this Tuesday?" Laura pushed herself up in the bed. "Quick! Get out of here, all of you. I've got to be on my way."

There was a chorus of: "But you're sick, Mrs. B. You can't go to Naples."

"This is my Tour and they are my girls," said Laura firmly. "Dead or alive, I'm going to be on that dock to meet them. Now, all of you run away—scat, vamoose!"

The girls started to scatter toward the door. Only Paul remained at her side.

She glared at him. "And you, Paul Merton, if you think you can stop me, you've got another think coming."

"On the contrary, I wouldn't dream of trying to stop you."

He sat down on the edge of the bed. Gently he put his hands on her arms and kissed her. "I can imagine marrying a steam roller, my dear, but I'd never try to stop one."

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BEST MYSTERIES OF THE MONTH

recommended by ANTHONY BOUCHER

You are probably in agreement with Queen and me that the short story is the original and still the noblest form of the detective story—or why should you be reading this magazine? For those of us with this allegiance, there's some grand summer reading in book form. Michael Gilbert's GAME WITHOUT RULES (Harper & Row, $4.95) contains 11 of the espionage adventures of Mr. Behrens and Mr. Calder, mostly from EQMM—beautifully written and plotted, chillingly plausible, and even more effective in one volume than in their separate appearances. By a wide margin, this is the most distinguished collection of spy short stories since Somerset Maugham's ASHENDEN. Rhys Davies' THE CHOSEN ONE AND OTHER STORIES (Dodd, Mead, $3.95) contains only one crime story; but that one (the title story) received MWA's Edgar for best of 1966, and its noncriminous companions are of almost equal stature.

★★★★ **THE HOCHMANN MINIATURES, *by Robert L. Fish*** (New American Library, $4.50)

The creator of Schlock Homes and José Da Silva presents Kek Huuygens, smuggler and con man, in a high-handed tale of vengeance and profit not unworthy of Arsène Lupin.

★★★★ **DOVER AND THE UNKINDEST CUT OF ALL, *by Joyce Porter*** (Scribner's, $3.95)

Oafish Chief Inspector Dover continues to be funny; and this time his creator presents him in a wonderfully outrageous trick plot.

★★★★ **A NEW LEASE OF DEATH, *by Ruth Rendell*** (Crime Club, $3.95)

For the readers who have almost given up mysteries since the death of Josephine Tey, Rendell may be just the quietly intelligent and perceptive Englishwoman to get them started again.

★★★ **BROTHERS IN ARMS, *by Hans Hellmut Kirst, translated by J. Maxwell Brownjohn*** (Harper & Row, $5.95)

Not quite another THE NIGHT OF THE GENERALS; but a comparably successful use of the pure detective story form to analyze society.

★★★ **FORGET WHAT YOU SAW, *by Jeffrey Ashford*** (Walker, $3.95)

Familiar theme of the intimidated witness given fresh immediacy by Ashford's fine understanding of policemen, criminals and plain people.

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Short stories are also plentiful and excellent in this summer's anthologies. ELLERY QUEEN'S ALL-STAR LINEUP (New American Library, $5.95) contains 22 stories from EQMM 1966, which was definitely a Good Year. I'm especially delighted by Charlotte Armstrong, Ursula Curtiss, John Creasey and debutant James Powell; but ALL-STAR is the word. THE PLAYBOY BOOK OF HORROR AND THE SUPERNATURAL (Playboy-Trident, $5.95) is not old-school ghost stories, but modern borderline chillers, most of which might easily have appeared in these pages. Generous long book, with 28 stories by Bradbury, Bloch, Matheson, Finney and such, especially the late Charles Beaumont. And I have no hesitation in recommending my own BEST DETECTIVE STORIES OF THE YEAR: 22ND ANNUAL COLLECTION (Dutton, $4.95), which contains what I think were the best stories of the magazine year 1966 (including Rhys Davies' Edgar-winner)—excepting the numerous "bests" in EQ's LINEUP.

★★★ **OTLEY PURSUED, *by Martin Waddell*** (Stein & Day, $4.95)

Spy-adventure combining the modern London anti-hero with the narrative techniques of silent-screen slapstick; absurd and enjoyable.

★★★ **PRIVATE I, *by Jimmy Sangster*** (Norton, $4.50)

Attractive first novel by well-known English screenwriter—lively, inventive and surprising spy-thriller.

★★★ **THE TWENTYMEN, *by Philip Purser*** (Walker, $3.95)

Ingenious plot for totalitarian takeover via TV, written with spirit and a great deal of knowledge about British politics and the BBC.

★★★ **SWING LOW, SWEET HARRIET, *by George Baxt*** (Simon & Schuster, $3.95)

Wicked and sparkling novel about the voguish revival of the films, the stars, and the murders of the 1930's.

★★★ **THE SEERSUCKER WHIPSAW, *by Ross Thomas*** (Morrow, $4.95)

Possibly not precisely a suspense novel; but an acute, colorful, and lusty tale of professional politics in the New Africa.

Fact-crime notes: Most of the cases treated in John Brophy's THE MEANING OF MURDER (Crowell, $5.95) are overfamiliar to the crime-fancier; but it is always worthwhile to listen to the reflections of a genuinely civilized and informed man. . . . Tony Parker studies, in WOMEN IN CRIME (Delacorte, $4.50), six characteristic graduates of England's penal system, and sounds (thank God!) like a good novelist rather than a sociologist.

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The Saunders Electronics payroll robbery had been pulled off without a hitch—a smooth caper, no sweat, and £35,317 in loot. There were six of them in the job, all old hands, and everything looked safe as houses. Then one of them got greedy—he wanted a bigger cut of the haul, a larger slice of the pie. Well, like a little learning, a little greed can be a dangerous thing . . .

ALIAS MR. MANCHESTER

by YOUNGMAN CARTER

THE ONLY ONE OF THE GROUP who looked like a criminal was George Arthur Gabel and it was characteristic of him that he came into the room first, and by an unexpected doorway. A massive slovenly figure, he wore perpetually an old-fashioned gray homburg with a bound brim—he was bald—and very dark glasses which also magnified—his eyes were weak. Beneath this a large nose, a gray slab of a face, and a rather greasy blue suit made up the unsavory picture.

He had come into the darkening room by the garden door and had sat down in an armchair which only just fitted his huge bulk.

Charles Dixon, who owned the house, discovered him when he turned on the light. Dixon had the air of a commercial traveler, which was how he usually described himself.

"You give me a shock, Mr. Gabel," Dixon said. "You're early. Half-past I was told. Never mind, it gives us time for a word."

"It doesn't," said the fat man in a wheezy whisper. "I know who's done this and I'm going to settle it here and now. In front of us all."

"That's good, Mr. Gabel. Very good indeed. A drink then?"

"My usual."

The suburban room had been furnished by a woman with a talent for the worst and a pocket to make it a triumph of trumpery. Dixon produced whiskey and water from an illuminated cabinet of chromium and glass which might well have contained a fruit-vending machine and a juke box as optional extras. They drank in oppressive silence.

Tony and Ron Myers, who were twins, announced their arrival by the echo-chamber exhaust of their car. A pair of cheerful, dirty young mechanics, they ran a garage and could not be mistaken for followers of any other trade. They came in, sheepish but truculent, like a couple of schoolboys hoping to brazen out some discovered insolence.

"What's all this lark?" said Ron.

"We don't like this caper," said Tony. "Not one bit."

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"Best to wait for the others, we thought," said their host. "George'll do the talking then. You two gentlemen take beer?"

"Our bet is that George is behind this whole ruddy business," said Ron. "And if he is then we're going to do him up so rotten he'll never walk again."

The gathering, it was clear, was not destined for social success. To complete it came a thin scarecrow of a man named Foster-Brown who might have been a seedy schoolmaster and "Doc" Tidmarsh, who suggested gymnasiums or prize-fighting but followed neither employment.

The twins continued to stand side by side before the multi-tiled fireplace, glowering like young bulls considering what to smash first. For a full minute no one spoke.

At length the fat man called Gabel pushed his hat to the back of his head, tilted his dark glasses, and heaved himself forward on his chair. His soft asthmatic voice necessitated attention if it was to be heard and he had about him the curious magnetism which goes with command.

"Sit down, boys. Sit down," he whispered, and when the silence became frozen he pulled some sheets of paper from his pocket, unfolded them, and waved them gently before his audience.

"Now, if you've all brought yours get 'em out. I want to compare them. Then we'll each have our say. In turn. *Then* we'll decide."

Papers were unfolded by each of the older men.

"We burned ours," said Ron. "No sense in keeping them. But we remember them okay."

"Very well then," said Gabel. "I hope you do. But just in case, Charlie-boy here is going to read his out to us. If there's any difference, even a comma, just say so. Otherwise belt up, see?"

"Why me?" said Dixon. "Why pick on me? You don't think that —?"

"Nobody's going to think yet," said the fat man. "You'll read it because it's your house we're in and you've got a lovely voice. Get on with it."

He nudged his hat forward again and slid back in the chair.

Their host glanced round the company and cleared his throat.

"'Dear Mr. Dixon,'" he began. "It's on a sheet of ordinary typing paper, typed, top copy, with no address; plain envelope also typed. 'Dear Mr. Dixon, About the Saunders Electronics payroll job which we carried off with such remarkable success that a total of £35,317 was netted without any special complications, I wish to draw your attention to a new development.

"'The fact is that I am not satisfied by the share-out and propose to arrange for it to be adjusted in my favor. I know I did not say this at the time but I have been recon-

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sidering my position, which I think is remarkably strong.

"'You will all, therefore, make me a contribution according to what I feel to be right and fair. I have included myself as one of the contributors, and will put in my proportion because I do not wish to court trouble by revealing my identity.

"'Here is the list and the sums you will pay me:

"'*George Arthur Gabel:* You are the so-called brains of the act but you are also the meanest of us and have always pocketed the last halfpenny of the small change. This time you'll return it. To straighten the record you will hand over £1,317.

"'*Charlie Dixon:* You have the guts of a field mouse but a neat way of arranging things. To compensate me for putting up with you and your horrible house you will pay me £1,000.

"'*Hamish Foster-Brown:* You did a neat job with the alarms but let's face it—they were dead simple, which makes you overpaid. From you £750.

"'*Doc Tidmarsh:* You may be clever with gelignite but you took a risk with those of us who were inside by failing to blanket properly. To teach you to be more careful next time you'll pay £750.

"'*Tony and Ron Myers:* Your sort are two a penny and you are inclined to talk too much. To encourage you, for all our sakes, to keep your mouths shut you'll pay £250, each of you.

"'I make this a total of £4,317. This is not much considering the take as advertised in the Press. You will put the cash in a cardboard box neatly wrapped and labeled *Mr. Manchester* and place it in a locker at Waterloo Station, and for all our sakes this will be done at 8:45 a.m. on a weekday. The key to the locker will be posted to Mr. Manchester, care of Clarke's Stores, 17 Postillion Street, W.C.2. which is a tobacconist-news shop where they take letters.

"'If by agreement you keep observation on Waterloo or Postillion Street I shall know all about it, of course, and if any of you decide to operate on your own account you will still be rumbled. That, too, is obvious. Nor do I advise any of you getting in some pals to help since we know just who they'd be and they'd want a bigger cut than I'm asking.

"'If I suspect any funny business I shall blow the whole story, go Queen's Evidence, and collect the reward, which is 10%—so I won't do badly if you don't come across.

"'I am allowing us two days from receipt of this letter to make up our minds. We will meet at Charlie's on Monday at 7:30 p.m. sharp, which gives us until Wednesday. If any of us don't turn up, there will be trouble.

"'If we decide to play silly beggars about this I will lay a little informa-

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tion on one of us on Thursday morning with Detective Inspector Hungerford who is in charge of inquiries according to the Press. He is a lazy buzzard and has better things on his mind by now, probably. This will be just enough to remind him and to tip him off on one of us, and I hope the man I pick on has an alibi which stands up. He'll need it. This will just be a gentle warning to show I mean business.

"'Best to agree, don't you think?

"'Yours sincerely

Mr. Manchester'"

As Dixon paused, the fat man struck the leather arm of his chair with the flat of his hand.

"Right," he said. "Everyone get the same note?"

"Seems right," said Ron. "Same sort of line, anyhow. As far as we're concerned you can all go to hell."

"That's right," added Tony, "just as soon as we've fixed whoever's done this."

The fat man struck the chair again.

"One at a time. But since you two have piped up we'll start with you."

"Flaming silly," said Ron. "Stands to reason it's not us. A letter like that—all fancy talk"—he imitated Dixon's clerical accents with skill—"'I wish to draw your attention to a new development.' Can you see Tony or me coming up with that kind of lingo. We can't type anyway."

"About all Ron can do is to write his name and he don't do that so good. We keep a skirt in the office for that lark," said his brother.

"Exactly," said the fat man. "A bit of skirt, Mavis Wilson, a right little doll by all accounts. No, it's not her. She's not got the brains any more than you two. But—" He slapped the chair again. "She has a sister. Young Stella. Now there's a clever lass. Went to a good school, ought to have done even better than she did if she hadn't got herself a bit of bad luck. Only sixteen then, she was, but knew quite a bit about blackmailing filthy old men. A pity one of them had a tape recorder and a couple of narks in the next room when she came to the final push. But it *was* blackmail."

He paused. "And this *is* blackmail."

There was a murmur of agreement.

"What about it, Ron?" said Doc Tidmarsh. "Stella's a clever kid and her sister is your typist. You two always did talk too much. Mavis might have known about the Saunders job all along and put her sister up to it."

The twins rounded on them, Ron in the lead. "Nuts," he said. "You're raving bonkers, the lot of you. We haven't seen Stella in months.Anyhow she's in—" he stopped in full flight. "She's in Manchester," he finished.

The obvious shock that his admission produced brought with it more

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sincerity than the outburst itself. He went on with the protest but the truculence was gone; he had become a puzzled man.

"No. No, it couldn't be Stella. She's living with a bloke in the rag trade who's loaded. Even sends her blasted old mother clothes. You can write her off. Not that she knew a thing about it— Couldn't have."

Instinctively the group appeared to recognize sincerity when that rare commodity appeared among them. The Myers brothers were for the moment clear.

"Very well, then," continued the fat man, calling the meeting back to order with his hand. "Now we come to you Mr. Foster-Brown. 'Overpaid because the job was dead easy' —that's what the man said. Could it be you meant *under*paid? You write a good hand, read books, and all that. Good education. Good job with Standard Alarms until you got too good for it. How about it?"

Hamish Foster-Brown had a certain dignity about him, something clinging to him from a different epoch in his career. Alone among the gang, he stood up to answer the charge and spoke in a gentle Scot's burr, as if he were lecturing students.

"All that you say, Mr. Gabel, is true. It was an easy one, as it turned out. I said I was satisfied with my cut—it was agreed beforehand in any case. I might not have been and for that you have only my word. But I am not your Mr. Manchester.

"You will want some proof of this, no doubt. Well, I'll give you what I can. Your letter was forwarded to me in the Waltham Hospital where I've been flat on my back for two weeks. Not a fatal complaint, you understand. I'd had a bad fall when I was doing a little research for another enterprise and had to walk quite a wee way before I dared collapse. It did me no good, that walk. I had to explain, you see, that it was my own stairs I'd fallen down. Then they took me off in an ambulance. I only came out yesterday morning. You can check all of this, you know, if you've a mind to."

He sat down gingerly. Each of the group recalled that he had limped into the room. Now they saw that his face betrayed him as a sick man.

Doc Tidmarsh muttered, "Okay, Guv'nor, okay," and Charlie Dixon expressed the general opinion.

"Not you, Mr. Brown, not you. I've got my own ideas, but you're not in my way of thinking."

Even the twins seemed disposed to accept the verdict.

Unexpectedly Doc Tidmarsh took the floor. "It's my turn," he said, "and you better listen good and proper. I can't write, I can't type, and I can't spell. I done a good job with that safe and you all know it even if the blowoff was more than we reckoned. My cut was fair and I got no complaints.

"But I tell you one thing, so catch on to it. When I get my

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hands on whatever sod among you lot is trying this little game, I'll fill his backside so full of jelly that there won't be no pieces. If it's you, Charlie-boy, I'll see you take your whole flaming doll's house with you, and if it's you, Mr. Fat Gabel, I'll cut you in slices first and I give you *my oath on that.*"

The explosion was impressive. In his more social moments Doc Tidmarsh had a range of Army reminiscences concerning the amusement to be obtained from little packets of gelignite delicately arranged as booby traps, calculated to turn even a cast-iron stomach. He had learned his trade with a Commando unit, and the group recalled uneasily a recent incident at a betting shop where the proprietor had failed to win Doc's admiration. No one seemed disposed to carry this part of the discussion any further.

"Charlie-boy," whispered the fat man, his dark glasses glinting venomously. "You got some explaining to do now. You can write, you can spell, you can type, and what's more you've the right sort of double-crossing mind for this lark. I wouldn't put it past you to squeal to the coppers.

"And another thing puts you right on the spot." Gabel produced an envelope from his pocket and flung it on to the table. "Postmark. This postmark says Wembley, right here where we're sitting. Posted just at the end of this road I shouldn't wonder."

An ominous rumble of approval greeted this charge. It was halted by Foster-Brown.

"That doesn't mean a thing." He spoke with authority. "Not a damn thing. D'you think I'd not notice something like that? Just look at this, Mr. Gabel—my envelope."

He thrust it under the fat man's nose. "Posted from Walthamstow or thereabouts. E.17, anyway. It could be from just opposite *your* little hideout. When I saw it in the hospital, I was sure it was from you before I opened it. Maybe there's nothing in that, but I've been looking at Mr. Dixon's copy—just checking on it, you know—and his was posted south of the river in Blackheath which might make us all think of the Myers Garage.

"No, definitely no. Whichever of us is responsible is too clever by half and in my opinion it's not the owner of this little birdcage of a villa we're in at this moment—he's too vain and too cautious. *But*—someone *is* just a mite too clever. You, Mr. Gabel."

"That's right," chimed in the Myers brothers.

"It looks like it," said Doc Tidmarsh.

"I give you my solemn word and may I drop dead this moment—" Charlie Dixon began before he realized the heat was off him.

The storm center veered to the man in the armchair. He shifted his enormous bulk and by turning his head conveyed that he was con-

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sidering each of them in turn. He spoke only when he had achieved complete silence and he held the pause with calculated authority.

"You perishing gibbering nitwits," he wheezed. "You're almost too stupid to be allowed out. If it weren't for me you'd all be inside by now. It was I who taught you to blow your noses on handkerchiefs. I taught you how to take care of yourselves, I got you together, and you're a useless bunch without me."

He surveyed them again in turn and then a wheedling note came into his whisper.

"Now think, boys, think if you can. I don't know now who did this, though I thought I did when I came here. I admit I've changed my mind. *But I do know one thing.* We're bust. We're clean bust, finito, kaput as a team, and we'd better face it. If there's no trust we're done for, and we were the best in the business. It'll take me years to find a bunch half as good. If you think I'd kick all this in for an extra cut—who arranged the perishing cuts, anyhow?—then you're even bigger fools than I thought."

He stood up with some effort. "That's the lot, as far as I'm concerned. I'm off now and you'll give me ten minutes start because I move slowly. I'm not giving Mr. Smart Guy Manchester a single solitary farthing and if you take my advice you'll do the same. Good night."

This was not the end of the meeting, which continued for over an hour; but, as usual, Gabel's word was final. The group decided unanimously to do nothing—which, after all, was the easiest—if not the safest—course.

It was not until the afternoon of the following Saturday that Charles Wilberforce Dixon, 43, described as a commercial traveler, residing at 17 Ponders Way, North Wembley, was taken into custody for questioning to assist the police in their inquiries into a payroll robbery at Saunders Electronics.

Inspector Hungerford eyed his victim with a friendly, almost intimate smile. The Inspector had a reputation for smoothness which some translated as a crafty use of the softly-softly-catchee-monkey technique.

"Charlie," he began. "A little bird has been whispering to me about you. Now don't get me wrong, this isn't something from an ordinary stoolie. This is *rather* special. My guess is that you've got a chum who isn't quite as fond of you as you've been supposing. Now we've time for a nice long chat and if you want some legal gentleman to hold your hand, we can wait all night for him to arrive."

The discussions did indeed last all night and well into the next day. Mr. Dixon was a cautious and painstaking man who knew just how sharp was the razor's edge on which he was teetering. But on Sunday evening he walked into the street

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a free man, having proved conclusively with the aid of his passport, two colored post cards, four hotel bills, six impartial witnesses, and a Continental telephone call, that at the relevant time he had been enjoying himself in Rome. Signor Emilio Valconi, manager of the Palazzo Valconi, personally recalled ejecting Signor Dixon from his premises for conduct unbecoming a guest in his elegant establishment. Even Inspector Hungerford did not know that Mr. Dixon had a brother who resembled him very closely whenever he chose to grow a mustache.

Two days later, on a Tuesday morning at the uncomfortable hour of 8:45 a.m., Tony and Ronald Myers, Charles Dixon and William Tidmarsh were arrested in front of a locker at Waterloo Station, together with George Gabel whom the four of them were escorting very closely. George Gabel had in his possession a parcel wrapped in brown paper, addressed to Mr. Manchester; the parcel contained £4,317 in banknotes.

Each man had contributed his share, including Hamish Foster-Brown who thereafter had prudently withdrawn from the proceedings leaving no forwarding address.

It was typical of them, as Inspector Hungerford pointed out, that each had paid his share of the demand in new banknotes which were part of the Saunders Electronics haul—the banknotes most dangerous to get rid of. It made the notes simple to identify and their possession was convincing evidence, especially when taken in conjunction with letters that all six of them were known to have received.

"You look remarkably pleased with yourself," said Inspector Hungerford's senior colleague as they took their mid-morning tea that day. "Can't say I blame you, but you took a damn long chance with those letters. Had your share of luck too."

The Inspector permitted himself the smile of a contented Chesire cat.

"There was no luck about it, my boy—no luck at all," he said. "The whole job had George Gabel written all over it, but he's far too fly to leave himself uncovered. Where George is, Charlie Dixon is close behind—that's been true for years now. Charlie Dixon always uses Foster-Brown for the alarms and Doc Tidmarsh for any jelly work and the Myers brothers do his getaway driving.

"There you have the entire gang, as I knew from the start. But Charlie's real specialty is the perfect alibi: he's a master of it and he probably fixes them for all concerned—as near as dammit watertight.

"No, they had to be tricked out into the open—it was the only way. So I wrote all six of them the same 'blackmail' letter. I wondered," he added, "if I might not be overplaying my hand when I described myself as a lazy buzzard. But of course, in some ways I am."

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Why were we attracted to this story? Well, we liked the background —a coffeehouse, "the best in the alley"; we liked the dialogue and the lingo and the narrator's pert and perky style . . . altogether "a spot of sleuthing free-lance, as it were" . . . So have yourself an espresso and and enjoy a "happening."

A TALE FROM THE CHAUCER

by SUSAN SEARS

HER NAME WAS BARBARA ALLEN. She was killed, brutally, at the whip end of a stormy March night in this city, this greatest and cruelest of towns. Her bloody corpse was discovered by Pippin MacIntosh, her neighbor from two flights down at 296 East Street. Pippin had climbed up the dim stairs to cry on friend Barbara's shoulder about me. In brief, I'm not the marrying kind.

There was no answer to Pippin's knock but light gleamed through the mud-colored transom and the sound of jazz beat Dixie-hot through the thin walls. Old lady Natter upstairs was pounding in reprisal on the radiator pipes. Pippin, puzzled, tried the doorknob, calling Barbara's name. The door opened, swinging lazily into the tenement kitchen. One hundred watts of naked overhead bulb shone dispassionately down on the ugly thing that once was Barbara Allen.

Pippin stood there for a long sick minute. Then she backed away into the hall, pulled the door shut with a gasp, and began to scream.

Larkin, the superintendent in 3B, roused himself from a television torpor and slowly betook himself in the direction of the screams overhead. He found Pippin babbling incoherently of the horror on the other side of the door. He tried the doorknob. But the door was now locked. Perhaps the young lady was imagining things?

No, it was open, Pippin swore, then screamed again. The unmistakable sound of a window inside the apartment rising up turned Pippin's sounds into whimpers. Larkin sighed and stolidly led with a massive shoulder against the door.

"She's murdered," Pippin sobbed.

"Not in my building she ain't," the superintendent grunted. And he charged the door with the other shoulder. It splintered with a mighty crack.

"I'll be damned," muttered Larkin.

The police came in response to a

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call from Mrs. Larkin who wandered up to see what was keeping Daddy from the wrestling matches.

"Now just you calm down, sweetie," she cooed shakily to Pippin. "Mustn't disturb the scene of the crime. Larkin will take care of it."

She led a dazed Pippin back to 3B which lay in a flickering blue shimmer of TV darkness. "What you need, sweetie, is a shot of something and I don't mean milk." She knelt down heavily to retrieve a bottled labeled "Rug Cleaner" from under the sink. "Me too. Don't tell Daddy about this, you hear?"

Mrs. Larkin poured whiskey into two cups, politely reserving the cracked one for herself. Settling her bulk down into a comforatble chair, she looked archly over her cup at Pippin. "You know something, I never had a murdered tenant before. Ain't this something?"

The cops came, the newshawks came, and the curious collected outside 296 East to sniff the blood in the wind. Mrs. Larkin held court on the stoop. Barbara Allen's father and mother came up from Kentucky to claim their only child and her effects which included one dulcimer and a menu card from the Chaucer. That's my place. I run a coffeehouse, the best in the alley. Barbara Allen waited on tables and sang folk songs there.

Monk Simeon, who runs the culture scene at the Chaucer, had found her sitting in our friendly neighborhood bus terminal on the second day of January of the year she was going to die. She was wearing a coat that was too thin, carrying a cardboard suitcase, a dulcimer, and her lovely head held high. The germs who frequent the terminal waiting for their fix or for a likely mark were beginning to zero in on her.

Monk rescued her, fed her, took her to Pippin's building where miraculously (or so it seemed at the time) there was an empty apartment, and kept a fatherly—I repeat, fatherly—eye on her.

I will set it straight here and now that Monk never laid a hand on her, romantic or murderous. Monk is a gentle soul with a heart of butter and sometimes the tongue of a longshoreman. He has been pining these many long years for Hester, an English female sculptor whose granite psyche will never be dented by Cupid's ardent flint.

Barbara Allen was a lousy waitress but a fine and natural singer. She sang straight in a fluty voice that made you ache like a lovesick kid. But she was a cool one, distantly beautiful and capricious, as only a green-eyed, red-haired woman of twenty-one can be. The feeling around the Chaucer was that she had teased some guy once too often.

"You don't put on a killer is the message, man," said Monk, who was not ashamed to cry.

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"So look for a guy with no sense of humor," said Mac.

Mac's a hackie who once strayed in for a cup of coffee and hasn't missed a poetry reading since. Monk swears Mac has the makings of another Walt Whitman. Me, I think old Walt filled the gap for a millenium or two. But I'm no culture vulture. A simple soul, I write cookbooks to pay the rent. Monk mutters into his copper-colored beard about a fine talent shot to hell, but I have no illusions. *Bake That Snake & Other Exotic Recipes* by Cap Cino is going into its fifth printing. You don't make money running a coffeehouse. Except when your best singer gets sliced up by a maniac. Then business picks up.

Also the cops get very interested in coffeehouse staff, management, and clientele, and since we are very interesting people to look at anyway, ranging from Village demimondaine to thrift shop bizarre to art store kook, we knew we were in for it. And we were. But the patron saint of eccentrics was with us. A thorough "creep by creep" grilling of the Chaucer regulars reaped a sheaf of alibis watertight, every one.

They also checked out our feet. We gathered there had been footprints. However, no one in our gang was walking in the rain that dirty March night. Taking into account the collective moody temperament of the group, that's a small miracle. Privately, I wondered. Captain Ware of Homicide expressed his disbelief quite publicly.

But he let Pippin, Monk, Mac, and me leave town to attend the funeral. Barbara Allen was laid to rest in a yellow pine box six feet under in peaceful Yonder Valley. Her kin looked at us with no great love. We got the feeling that there was plenty of room for us down Yonder too. It was a long, long way from 296 East.

When we got back we found the cops were up that well-known creek. They hadn't found any male Cinderella to fit the bloody footprints found on the window sill (This, courtesy of the knowledgeable Larkin) and were inclined to be short-tempered when queried by the hard-breathing press. Photo spreads of East Street, the alley, the Chaucer, and the denizens thereof enlivened the week-end for the masses.

Killer Stalks Bohemia—that was the leit motif. Even my aged tomcat, Osiris, was caught by a candid camera atop the Chaucer garbage can, snarling lecherously at a delicate blonde babe, photographer for the morning paper. She captioned the photo *Alley Fights Back—Police Harassment Defied*.

Ware didn't like that. Neither did I. The picture didn't do Ozzie justice by half.

Therefore it came as a large surprise when Ware suggested that I do a spot of sleuthing free-lance, as

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it were. His attitude toward me had not previously suggested the slightest confidence in my intelligence. It was obvious that Ware was desperate. So I informed him honestly that a detective I am not. When the point comes in the mystery story when it is time to take five and find out who done it because it should be apparent to any day-old clod that it was the butler's sister—when that point comes I am clapping the cuffs on the butler and setting it up for my place at seven with the butler's sister. I can tell you to the milligram where the shallots went, but that's as close as I'll ever get to any Ellery Queensmanship.

However, the idea that there was maybe a murderer kaffee-klatching on my premises was not exactly heart-warming. I was beginning to boil around the old Adam's apple at the types that all the publicity was sending my way. For me, the Chaucer was rapidly becoming a jail occupied by idiots. I'd spent too many years of my young manhood building it up to be my place for my friends. The invasion from the outside world affected me exactly as a sackful of toads on the pillow would affect you.

I was, let's say, distraught. Mad as hell at the thrill-happy new customers who piled into the Chaucer, driving out the regulars, my friends. Also it would have given me great personal pleasure to put my arm on the s.o.b. who had hacked to death a beautiful girl who had sung like a bird.

Prospective culprits and sleuths sat themselves down to my antique chess tables, their eyes wetly appealing to the shadows. Was that dark skinny one over there by the espresso machine a killer? (I tweaked my Vandyke viciously and Mrs. tourist-type from Oshkosh shuddered in blissful alarm.) Since the rest of the world is playing amateur 'tec at my joint, I told Ware, I might as well join the "in" group. I politely refrained from mentioning the plainsclothesman dispatched by Ware to the Chaucer, cleverly disguised in beret, sandals, and one earring. (Mac taught him chess.)

Mind you, the poor fuzz was only doing his job but it was a bad time for any gendarme behind the demitasse. Among my new customers who read tabloid headlines and traveled I counted the hip kiddies. Hip kiddies smoke grass and if they smoke grass in your place, that's it. You're busted. Grass is marijuana to you older folks and to the hip kiddies—maybe you know about them. Maybe you got one at home. If so, keep him there. That kind of trouble I don't need.

Monk calls them the hip kiddies; I call them the losers. What do they look like? Picture the kids next door. Color them blank. Now wipe the picture with a gray scum. Color them sad. They come from every tentacle of the city sprawl. They're

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rich and they're poor and they're looking for action. Also they are very young.

They find the action. There are plenty of grown-up types in this city who can use a little change and selling grass to kids like these is big business. Dust the grass with a sprinkling of snow (heroin, parents) and you are setting up a business relationship more than likely to continue.

I ended up spending as much time checking out the quality of the smoke the hip kiddies were puffing as I did checking out potential murderers. Pippin, who is a splendid waitress, sped from ashtray to ashtray like Wonder Woman in bluejeans. It seemed a good time to give the Police Department some intellectual assistance in return for a little understanding about the hip kiddies.

And, by gum, what more could I give? Homicide had its bright boys working overtime in the lab and on the beat. Ware's idea was that since I knew the—uh—scene, I might be able to come up with—uh—some original thoughts. I thought of the hip kiddies, I thought of Mr. and Mrs. Oshkosh, I thought of the dead girl, and I said okay, sir, you're on. And went back to the Chaucer and called a meeting of the finest.

Pippin, Monk, Mac, and I.

"Let's review the available evidence," said Monk. "She didn't scream because she was killed instantly by a steak knife in the back. Then the bum has himself a little carving party. Pippin here comes up the stairs. Clump. Clump."

"I didn't clump."

"And hollers for her friend and walks into the scene of the crime yet. And Jack the Ripper is probably standing behind that door, babe."

"Don't remind me," said Pippin.

"Luckily for our best waitress, she has the sense to depart in a hurry and while she is bellowing for assistance, the killer locks the door. There is no time to wash up—Larkin of the big shoulder is outside, conversing with our young lady."

I continued. "So he takes a gander through the window. A fire escape. He wipes his prints off the knife although he is forgetting if you step in blood you track up the house. There is no one in the courtyard below. And out he goes. Lucky for him there is a convenient thunderstorm happening which cuts down on observant passers-by and also washes off the gore in the courtyard. And then he vanishes into nowheresville. Him and his big feet."

"She had to know him. She would never open the door to a stranger," said Pippin.

"Every male she knew has been questioned and let go."

"Every man we knew she knew," Pippin corrected. "She kept things to herself, that one."

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"Pray continue and like that," said Monk.

Barbara Allen was close-mouthed about her boy friends, we found out. When Pippin got off her favorite topic, unregenerate me, and paused hopefully for Barbara to join in the I-hate-men chant, Barbara was unforthcoming. Pippin felt Barbara was looking for a city slicker and she didn't want interference or comment. Pippin's "one great and true love" was so much moonshine to Miss Allen. She did say once, "I don't want no hick." And that was the end of the subject love. If Barbara Allen had had a true love, no one knew who he was.

"There must have been *somebody* who saw him," said Mac.

"Sure there was," I said. "And so what? King Kong could walk with the head of Fay Wray down East Street at high noon and no one would blink a lash. Don't get involved, remember?"

On East Street you play it cool. By day the innocents in tourist buses wind through its crooked ways to gawk at the colorful natives; by night the colorful natives, at least the law-abiding ones, barricade themselves behind triple-locked doors.

"Supposing she met him here," Pippin breathed. "That's what keeps going through my head. Maybe I've been *waiting* on a murderer!"

"This city," said Mac, "you got to take the bad with the good."

"Maybe," I said. "But I don't think it was one of the regulars."

We have a few painters who belt their women around occasionally but they usually stop short of homicide. No one wants to lose a good free model who also washes socks and chops the garlic. Most of the poets wouldn't get up off their butts long enough to toss a nasty two-liner, except at another poet. Poets only carve up the competition and this they do very good. Besides, Barbara didn't dig the poets or their poems. She liked the natty dressers.

The all-around creative types who made their money uptown and slummed downtown were a more likely bet. We proceeded to give the admen, the TV directors, the art gallery entrepreneurs, the copywriters, et cetera, our attention. But no one was looking guilty like a killer should.

"An old flame?" suggested Mac.

"They checked them out, remember?" I said. "Each ex-swain has come up like innocent and accounted for by employers, wives, or relatives. And you can't catch an uptown express from Kentucky. Comings and goings are noticed."

"We are getting nowhere fast," said Mac, "in case you hadn't noticed, pal."

"Hold on, the night is young," I said. "We must examine the psychological aspects, the character of the victim. She was slain in a particularly ugly way. Her beauty was

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what the killer had to obliterate. It haunted him and finally, madly, he —"

"Get Perry Mason here," said Monk sweetly, stirring the whipped cream down into his cup of Viennese.

"It was a man. Of course, it had to be," said Pippin.

"Unless it was a three-hundred-pound door-to-door cosmetics saleswoman with a grudge against redheads who glommed on to her husband," said Monk.

As we talked we began to see just how little we did know about Barbara Allen. We had seen her nearly every working day in the three months of her short life in town. Yet we didn't know her at all when you got right down to the nitty-gritty. She was like a silhouette shaped by moonlight. When you turned man-made light on her, she disappeared.

Still the body in Yonder Valley was real and lay in darkness forever—someone had seen her as vulnerable flesh and blood. My next question was, why had she been so distant, so much in control? Was she hiding something? What did we know, for instance, about her life before she came to the city?

"It wasn't much of a life," commented Pippin. "She told me that much. Her father drank and her mother took to old-time religion—damnation for breakfast, lunch, and dinner which was sometimes all they had on the table. Barbara said to me once, 'I don't aim to get me saved until I got something to repent for and when that happens I ain't certain either.' "

"Down there they get married early and I mean early," said Mac. "She was an old maid the way they see it. Wonder why she finked out?"

"She didn't want no hick, remember," I sighed.

"Bet the hicks didn't like that. Maybe one came up here to change her mind."

"We've gone over that, Mac. The Yonder constabulary says different. Every manjack of them was tucked into his trundle bed that night."

"So how do they know?" grumbled Mac. "We saw that place down Yonder. The houses aren't exactly close together."

"Why would they lie?" asked Pippin. "They get pretty grim down there when something happens to kinfolk. Look at the Hatfields and McCoys."

"This is what I am thinking if you'll stop interrupting, puh-leez, lady," shouted Mac. "Maybe they settle things different down there. Suppose it is somebody from Yonder, or they have good reason for thinking so. So they solve it like the mob does up here. For example, if one of Joe Vivace's boys gets out of line, does Joe pick up the phone and say, operator, would you get me the District Attorney. Oh, sure. When the cops come around Joe has an alibi for his boy; when the cops leave Joe gives the word to his

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goons to exterminate What's-his-face. I am telling you, the murderer is probably pushing up the daisies himself by now."

"That's a thought," I said jealously.

"You might have something there," Monk agreed.

"I think I am going to take a return trip to Yonder Valley," I said, thus effectively bringing the attention back to me.

"With a shovel?" asked Mac who was beaming with triumph.

"He's bringing his sonic corpse detector with the buckle in back," murmured Pippin.

I ignored her. "Assuming that there may be something in your wild-eyed theory, Mac, there are other reasons for returning to the victim's previous environment. We have found that we know surprisingly little about her. Now, if we know that little about the victim, it is not surprising, *n'est-ce pas,* that we know that little about the murderer, too."

"Correction—we know nothing," said Monk.

"He wears shoes," said Pippin.

"So," I continued, "we, meaning I, since I can give myself a vacation, must closely question all those who knew her when she was growing up, must minutely examine the least and last detail of her Yonder existence."

"And how does a wiseguy like you think he's going to get any change out of the yokels who were not too impressed with you the last time?" asked Mac.

"I'm going in disguise," I chuckled.

"Come off it, Cino."

"As a traveling salesman, a route I have traversed before in my youth, albeit not down Yonder way. A beardless traveling salesman. They'll never recognize me without the whiskers."

"That's for sure," said Mac.

I got on the hot line to Ware who said that—uh—he'd look after the shop while I was gone. And my idea was—uh—worth trying. Also I should keep in touch. That was important, he said.

It took about a week to find the job I wanted. Monk had an uncle who knew somebody who had a cousin in Louisville who turned out to a good buddy of the v.p. of B. Strokable Stockings and Sundries. The v.p. introduced me to Bill Sweet, the man I was going to replace, for training. Sweet was destined for higher things on the west coast. He was a tall fast-talker who could sell a night light to an owl and he competently taught me what there was to know about Strokable and the women of Yonder Valley about whom, it developed, he knew plenty. I wondered, naturally, if he'd known Barbara Allen. (Slyly, I mentioned that it had been in all the city papers.)

It turned out that Mrs. Allen's religious convictions didn't include nylons for her nor her daughter

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neither. Sweet had never laid eyes on Miss Allen, he said, and too bad too, for he heard she was a looker all right, but stuck-up as they come. If somebody had settled her hash—well, he wasn't surprised: mountain folk have got right short fuses when their women get uppity.

Oh, did he think it was someone from her past, I asked casually. More than likely was the answer. He, for one, had had enough of the yokels, he continued. My (Mac's) theory was beginning to look good. I studied my Strokable catalogue diligently.

I arrived at Yonder Valley three days later, driving a snazzy company car with a shovel in the trunk for emergency exhumations. I was suited in a double-breasted glen plaid and shod in crepe soles for taking to my heels if the locals caught on. It was spring green, it was pretty, and it was terribly quiet in Yonder except for the birds who were making one heck of a racket. But then I'm a city boy and my Walden Pond was water running down the gutter when we turned on the fire hydrants in the summer. To put it quickly, I like a crowd—around me. I was more than eager to connect with some customers.

First on the list was Mrs. Ivy Lamb, the preacher's wife. We discussed sin, stockings, and sundries over a pitcher of lemonade and a swinging chocolate pie. After securing the recipe for the pie, I got down to brass tacks.

"Oh, it was a terrible thing that happened," she said, "but no doubt the girl got what was coming to her. Never been saved, that's a fact." (I hoped I was looking saved.)

"But it is for the Lord to decide, Mr. Cino," she said. "He will punish the evildoers. It is out of our hands. We are mere instruments of His justice."

"Oh?" I said.

"Have another slice of pie," she said. I couldn't resist. The conversation on Barbara Allen had definitely been closed. Mrs. Lamb bought a dozen sensible sheer in evening taupe. I departed, well-fed but puzzled.

I took the car farther up into the hills. More trees, more noisy birds, no people. The road was full of potholes and then abruptly, it was dirt. I checked the map. The famous detective was lost. I heard a rustle in the woods—a running rustle if you know what I mean. Anybody there, I halloed. Nobody was. Or nobody was answering.

A hunch crawled up my spine. I turned the car around in a dusty U-turn and beat it down the hill fast. A shot rang out. I was beginning to see why Sweet had transferred out. At the bottom of the hill I read the sign I had missed going up—*No Trespassers*. My heart slowed down to triple-time. I kept my eyes wide open from that moment on.

Somehow I managed to find my next few customers in the wilder-

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ness. But as Hercule Poirot I was not exactly making out. Murder was not the gossip catalyst I thought it would be. The subject, Barbara Allen, was coolly passed over in favor of the weather or dismissed in a snort of indignation.

I was bugged, too, because my customers openly expressed their preference for my mentor and predecessor, Sweet. They hoped he wasn't ailing. Surely he'd be back soon. When I broke the sad news of his advancement, female faces fell a country mile. Apparently I wasn't a patch on his trousers.

I assuaged my diminishing ego by capturing their recipes since that's all that was up for barter. And did Inspector Maigret fuss when a beautiful woman treated him as just another cop? He did not. He thought of Mme. Maigret simmering something luscious back in the apartment. A wave of homesickness felled me. I badly needed a cup of good espresso.

I got it—espresso of the district, otherwise coffee—on my next and last stop for the day. The buxom, fortyish Mrs. Peacham had it boiling on the stove. But the conversation took an annoyingly familiar tack. The concern that Mrs. Peacham expressed for old Bill Sweet was nothing short of shameful. She wanted to know everything he'd been doing. Heaven knows what goes on at those big conventions in the big city. She hinted that I, another man of the world, could tell her. I replied that it was all hard work and no play, madam. At which she reasonably hooted.

"Why, I bet he's plumb tuckered out after that last big convention and that's why you're taking his place, isn't that right?" She plucked a worn postcard from her apron pocket. "Lookit here," she gurgled. "He sent me a postcard from the Triocadero. 'Having wonderful time but wish you and Jed were here.' Jed's my husband, so he had to say that, you know, otherwise Jed, he'd raise the roof. Can't pull the wool over Jed's eyes," she grinned. I got a mental picture of Jed buried under a heap of fleece.

I looked at the flashy handwriting on the card with irritation. Dotted all his i's with circles. He would, I thought unkindly. I glanced at the postmark to find out when Strokable had a convention. Someone else might be asking. March 26. Sweet *had* seemed rather fatigued—the convention accounted for it then. I was weary of Sweet, so I changed the conversation to Mrs. Peacham's burgoo which I'd heard was famous in Yonder Valley.

"Well, aren't you nice to ask! It's nothing really. With a couple of fat Yonder squirrels you can't go wrong, but I reckon you don't have them where you come from, Cap. You don't mind I call you by your Christian name?"

I allowed that I didn't. There was a fact bumping around in my craw and I was trying to dislodge it. Mrs.

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Peacham's soft fingers on the back of my neck weren't helping. I wondered where Jed was.

"March 26?" I blurted out.

"Landsakes," exclaimed Mrs. Peacham. "You are a terrible detective."

I stared at her rosy countenance, which was edging dangerously close to mine. "What did you say, Mrs. Peacham?"

"I said you are a terrible detective. I saw you at the funeral, you know. You were wearing that funny beard which didn't fool nobody. We know you and that other feller were in disguise. You can't put anything over on us Yonder folks. It's too bad you got him before we did though."

"You were waiting for him?"

"We figured he'd come back this way. To thumb his nose in our faces. Then you show up asking questions and collecting recipes. Tell me, is that any kind of a thing for a grown man to do—collecting recipes? Why didn't you come straight out and ask what you want to know?"

"Why in the devil didn't you tell the police your suspicions?" I roared.

"They wasn't whatchamaycallims." Mrs. Peacham drew herself up. "We *knew* it was him. Old Annie saw it in a dream the night after we buried Barbara Allen. She's never been wrong yet. Second sight. You could use it in your line of work from what I can see."

"Second sight won't hold up in court. Sweet told me he never saw Barbara Allen, didn't know her at all."

"Fish-tosh. You believe everything you hear? Matter of fact, he grew up the road down apiece from her house."

"Oh," I said. "Well, it looks as if we'll have to see if the shoe fits."

Jed came in the back door with a load of kindling and a sparky look in his eye.

"You the damn-fool detective from the city?" he asked.

What could I say but yes.

"John Allen wants to apologize on account of he took a shot at you, but he didn't know it was you at the time, you see. Me, I can't see it would of mattered much." He spit handily into a container on the floor twelve feet away.

"Thanks anyhow," I said. "Er, where is Mr. Allen?"

"Went home to feed the pigs, I reckon. Not much for talking to strangers."

I said my goodbyes and went in search of a phone that wasn't connected to Yonder Central's far-flung network. Ware said he had to hand it to me.

Well, it turned out that Bill Sweet wore 13 Triple A and his shoes fitted the prints perfectly. Would you believe he was still wearing them when they picked him up? Cost him fifty bucks, he said later. And sweet William didn't have an alibi for that stormy March

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night. He had, in fact, been missing from the fun and games at the Triocadero for a few hours that night, according to his mates. He had got Barbara's address beforehand from a Yonder lady who had left a letter lying about. Barbara had jilted him, of course. Despite his spiffy clothes and fancy car, he was still a hick to her.

Business at the Chaucer has come back to normal—that is, back to the red. The hip kiddies and the Mr. and Mrs. Oshkosh types have gradually drifted away and they are not missed. The regulars are back. We have a new singer-waitress who's a graduate student in Anthropology and is strong on Incan chants but weak in looks. That's okay by me. Another Barbara Allen I don't need.

Mac's first thin volume, *Exits and Freeways,* is enjoying select acclaim. The culture is better than ever. Monk has inaugurated *matinée* poetry "happenings." And Pippin, during my absence in Yonder Valley, became engaged to a prosperous toothpaste executive with very white teeth. Women. You can't trust 'em.

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Richard's brother had disappeared. But it was all so mysterious, because Richard did not know when his brother had left the old sixteen-room house, or why he had left, or where he had gone. And Richard had to know—he simply had to know . . .

THE SHADOW OF HIS ABSENCE

by FRANK SISK

JUNE 4: WHERE HAS MY BROTHER gone?

I now commit to paper this question that has silently plagued my mind for nearly a week. Where has he gone? And why? And exactly when did he leave?

The precise time of his disappearance is, of the three questions, perhaps of most consequence. If only I could answer that, I might be able to answer the others. But I am not even sure of the day he departed, not to mention the hour.

Sometimes I think I last saw him on a Saturday afternoon. At other times I believe it was a Sunday morning. This is an especially humiliating situation, is it not, for brothers who have been almost inseparable since the day of their joint nativity thirty-one years ago?

But on second thought, this very habit of closeness, of deep consanguinity, may have created the very element which made me feel Robert was still in the house long after he had gone. Yes, that may be it—the shadow of his absence lingered a while as a substance of its own.

That is the explanation I shall give to the police if I must approach them in this matter.

June 5: Since yesterday I have given much careful thought to the question of When. As a result, I have pretty well decided that Saturday was the day of Robert's disappearance. I believe I can narrow the time even further. Saturday afternoon. For I seem to recall having a light lunch with him (cream cheese and chives in celery stalks with tall glasses of iced tea laced with dark rum) and discussing the feasability of dining that night on baked bluefish.

I cannot be absolutely sure, of course, because we often discussed the merits of baked bluefish, especially in the late spring of the year. That is when the blues begin to run off Montauk Point. Freshly caught, they are available at a fish store on the wharf in Old Saybrook. It was Robert's keen pleasure to purchase blues several times during the season and stuff them himself in accordance with an old family recipe

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and then turn them over to the cook with strict instructions on the baking time and the degree of heat. The result was invariably delicious.

I seem to recall that he planned to go to the wharf that Saturday afternoon. But in my mind's eye I do not see him returning. And I am quite positive we did not have baked bluefish for dinner.

Another matter that makes me certain of Saturday afternoon is my clear memory of Sunday morning. Irene went to church alone. This in itself was so unusual that I am amazed at not having remembered it earlier. The one rigid practice in their otherwise rather loose way of life has always been a hypocritical observance of the Sabbath. Perhaps I should add that the hypocrisy is largely Irene's and in Robert's case it is mostly submissive conformity.

Yes, she very definitely went to church alone on Sunday. I offered no comment at the time, nor have I offered one since, for it has been my unbreakable rule never to intrude between husband and wife. When several adults of disparate views and interests dwell together under one roof, even though that roof be vast, it is always the best policy to keep one's own counsel and preserve a mien of quiet courtesy. This is often a difficult posture to maintain with a female like Irene, but up to now I have been able to manage it.

And now that I think of it, Irene was particularly ill-humored that morning. In fact, as I reconstruct the picture of her standing before the hall mirror, pulling white gloves over her strong pianist's fingers, I realize that she was very, very angry.

Was Robert upstairs in their room at that moment? Or was he already missing?

I turn these thoughts over and over in my mind and I wonder why I have not raised the subject of Robert's absence with his wife, or she with me.

June 6: To assuage my nagging curiosity I drove into Old Saybrook this morning and paid a visit to Trittler's Fish Store down on the wharf. I had never before been inside the place, but of course the hogheaded man behind the counter assumed he knew me.

"You're kind of a stranger here, Mr. Rickerston," he said, wiping thick hands on a dirty apron.

"I'm a complete stranger here," I said, smiling.

"I mean I ain't seen you around in more'n a month now."

"Inadvertently you have given me the information I came for," I said. "Thank you, Mr. Trittler, if that is your name."

The man looked frankly baffled. "You know my name as well as I know yours, Mr. Rickerston."

"In that case, sir, we might do well to introduce ourselves because I'm not the person you think I am."

The man was wearing a straw

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skimmer as stained as his apron. Pushing it back, he scratched his bald head doubtfully, then said, "You don't talk like the Mr. Rickerston I know, I'll say that."

"I am not the Mr. Rickerston you know," I said patiently. "I am his brother—his twin brother."

"Spittin' image," said Mr. Trittler, rebalancing his hat.

"A marked resemblance."

"Marked is good. I don't think I could tell you apart if you was standing side by side."

"Robert's a little heavier," I said.

"Now that you mention it."

"And exactly one half inch shorter."

"You don't say."

"I most certainly do say, Mr. Trittler. These are trivial differences not generally noticed by the average observer. I draw attention to them now so that, in the future, you may possibly be able to tell one of us from the other. One more thing." I doffed my Panama hat. "Robert's hair is thinner than mine and to conceal the deficiency he has always worn it long. Mine is somewhat thicker and habitually cropped short."

"I don't think I've ever seen him with his hat off."

"Understandable, Mr. Trittler."

"Usually he come in and stayed only a minute or two. To pick out a blue or two. And I'm sold clean out of 'em today, Mr. Rickerston."

"Did he come in here on a blues mission the Saturday before last?"

"On a blues—? Why, no, sir. As I said earlier, I ain't set eyes on you—or him, I mean—in more'n a month, maybe closer to two."

"You're sure of that?"

"Commonly sure, I guess. Must have been all of five or six weeks ago. He drove up to the front door in that little red car you're using now. Or one like it."

"That's Robert's car," I said. "I drove it purposely today in the hope it would stimulate your memory."

Mr. Trittler's permanent expression seemed to be one of either genial stupidity or grinning confusion. "Well, I don't know about that. Offhand all I can say is he come in here five-six weeks back. I can't place the day of the week but I do recall I was clean out of blues that day too and I sold him a nice fresh sea bass instead."

"I remember that sea bass very well," I said.

"You do?" said Mr. Trittler happily.

"Oh, yes. Robert brought it home and prepared it himself. Delicious."

"Right glad you enjoyed it, sir. Now I got sea bass on hand again today."

"I never do the marketing," I said. "Thank you just the same. And good morning."

June 7: Tonight this thought prevails: Irene married Robert for his money.

This is not a new thought. It is the final germination of a seed

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which took root even before their incongruous attachment to each other was solemnified. They had nothing in common, really. Robert was always gentle, considerate, self-effacing, loyal, whereas Irene is the epitome of the modern woman at her worst—hard and glittering and entirely self-centered.

Now if she had married me instead of my brother, she would have met more than her match. There was a time when the bare possibility existed. It was the occasion of our first joint meeting at somebody's lawn party—the Fultons' or the Ormsbys', I think. But wherever, I instantly sensed Irene's feline instinct as she covertly surveyed us.

She sprang first at me.

"You must be Rich," she said. I knew she meant the diminutive of Richard, but as my knowledge of her has broadened I often feel there may have been an adjectival overtone present.

"Richard, yes," I said. "That is my name. Nobody has ever called me Rich."

"I've heard you referred to as Rick then."

"That is what some people call my brother."

"I'm certain Jane Ormsby said your brother's name was Robert." So, on further thought, the party must have been at Ormsbys'.

"You were correctly informed," I remember saying in my deliberate manner of condescension. "His name is Robert. If you care to confirm it, he is standing over there between a plump hydrangea bush and the equally rotund Ellis Crimmins, our suburban psychiatrist."

She forced a smile. "But where in the world does one get Rick out of Robert and not out of Richard?"

"One actually gets it from Rickerston, our surname."

"Comes the dawn," she said.

A few minutes later, obviously deciding I was not her quarry, she stalked across the greensward to sharpen her talons on my guileless brother and the unctuous Dr. Crimmins. And just a few months after that, exactly two days after our twenty-fifth birthday, Robert (or Rick as she insisted on calling him) and Irene were married in a lavish ceremony on these very premises, with myself acting under firm self-constraint as the best man.

I mention our birthday because the event legally marked our inheritance of full control of the estate left by our parents, who had been killed three years earlier in an automobile accident.

June 8: This afternoon I made a mystifying discovery. It began with a resolution, formulated during a solitary lunch, to search the house. It is a large house, containing sixteen rooms and the cluttered hinterlands of attic and cellar. I was absolutely alone in it for the first time in months. Irene was in Hartford on a shopping trip and both the

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cook and the maid were taking a day off.

I do not know precisely what I expected to find. Certainly not Robert. If he were in the house, either dead or alive, an extrasensory perception would have told me.

I started in the den that my father used to favor. It had not been used in years, nor entered except by the maid for a weekly dusting. It still contained shelf upon shelf of my father's old books—histories of military campaigns from the time of Alexander the Great to General Grant. Father had not approved of any major battles after the Civil War. "Too mechanized," he used to say. "Too dehumanized."

I had given the snug room a vaguely sentimental examination and was about to leave when I noticed the ashtray. It was partly hidden by a blotter that leaned against it at one edge of my father's desk. But once I saw it the two cigarette butts it contained were discernible.

Irene did not smoke. None of the servants smoked. And I had broken myself of the habit a year ago. This left only Robert who, despite his wife's frequent exhortations, remained meekly addicted.

I took one of the butts from the ashtray. It was the same brand I had once preferred and that Robert still used. On the basis of this evidence, I concluded that Robert had recently used the den for a surreptitious smoke.

How recently? Well, it was now Friday. The maid's day for tidying up the downstairs rooms, including the den, was always and unfailingly Monday. And no maid responsible to Irene's discipline would ever leave an unclean ashtray lying around.

These assumable facts led to only one possible conclusion: my brother, missing for approximately two weeks, had been in this house within the last four days. Was he hiding from me? Or from Irene? And if so, why?

And where was he now?

I spent what remained of the afternoon in a hasty exploration of the house from top to bottom. In vain. But as I searched I felt that a conspiracy, palpable as a web, was being spun about me from all sides—by some mysterious source and for some terrible reason.

As I write these lines it is just past midnight. A moment ago I heard Irene's car crunching up the gravel driveway. I entertained the thought of confronting her on the stairs with a demand for information as to Robert's whereabouts. Then I decided against such an action. It would be most rash for Irene if she were part of the conspiracy. Most rash indeed.

Tomorrow I will take the entire matter to the police.

June 9: This morning I breakfasted alone. Irene as usual was served in bed. Such has been the practice here since Robert went away.

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As I drank a second cup of coffee, I reconsidered my decision of last night to go to the police. Just as well. For as a result of today's findings, there is much more now to tell them. As soon as I have organized and properly weighed what I know, I will drive into town.

Meanwhile I must record here what I have learned today.

After breakfast a suggestive force took me back to my father's den. When I opened the door I think I half expected to see Robert standing by the desk, with a smile of apology on his face for the cigarette in his hand. But the room was empty. It had not changed since yesterday except for one thing: the ashtray now contained a third butt.

Inwardly disturbed but outwardly calm, I strode across the room to the door of the private lavatory. Yesterday I had not opened this door. It was the only place in the entire house that my search had overlooked.

Tight-lipped, I turned the knob and said, "Robert."

Nothing.

I opened the door slowly, saying, "Robert, Robert," and finally condescending to say, "Rick."

I flung the door wide. The little lavatory was naked in its emptiness. It was then, though, that I made my strange discovery.

First it was a mere glint in my eye. A ray of sunlight striking something metal on the porcelain shelf above the sink. On closer inspection the metal proved to be a pair of scissors with fairly long blades, such as one would find in a tailor's shop. Or in a barber's.

A barber's was more apt, for next to the scissors was a small accumulation of hair. Taking a few wisps between thumb and forefinger, I scrutinized them. Fine, silken, light brown. Robert's. But why should Robert want to trim his hair short like mine?

Why?

June 10 (A.M.): Ten minutes ago I returned from the police station where I was closeted for at least an hour with a detective sergeant named Carl Pinder. Chief Varney himself was also present for five or ten minutes. I must say that both treated me with the deep respect that the Rickerston name always elicits in this part of Connecticut. Nonetheless, I came away with the nagging feeling that neither the Chief nor the detective appreciated the desperate urgency for prompt action.

Let me recapitulate the interview while it is still fresh in my mind. In that way I may be able to learn why I failed to make a strong case.

PINDER: A cigarette, Mr. Rickerston?

MYSELF: Thank you, Pinder. I do not smoke. On second thought, I may have one at that. Nerves, you know.

PINDER: You were telling Chief Varney that your twin brother

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has been missing for two weeks?

MYSELF: That is correct. For about two weeks.

PINDER: And your brother's name is Robert?

MYSELF: That is correct.

PINDER: Will you please give me a detailed description of your brother, sir?

MYSELF: I think that is hardly necessary. We are identical, to all outward appearances, except for a few minor variances.

PINDER: It's those little things we want to know. (*Opens pad on desk and prepares to write*)

MYSELF: Well, this cigarette, for example.

PINDER: Yes, what about it?

MYSELF: It is my first in more than a year. Made up my mind to quit as I retired one evening, and that was that. My brother, on the other hand, repeatedly promised his wife that he would at least reduce his consumption of cigarettes, but—

PINDER: Your brother has a wife?

MYSELF: Of course. I thought that was common knowledge.

PINDER: I'm afraid I'm not a native of these parts, Mr. Rickerston. Are you also married?

MYSELF: No, I am not.

PINDER: What is the name of your brother's wife?

MYSELF: Irene.

PINDER: And she lives with you and your brother in the family residence?

MYSELF: You couch it quite realistically, Sergeant. But from Irene's point of view I might be said to live with them. If you get the point. In fact, I have lately been feeling so much the superfluous man that I may take up quarters elsewhere.

PINDER: I see. Now let me check a few things again. Your brother disappeared two weeks ago. (*Scans pad*) You told Chief Varney he didn't leave by car. Or at least not by his own. He took no suitcases or extra clothing as far as you know, and you searched the house with this in mind. And nobody seems to have seen him since, not even (*squinting*) the fish man. Who the hell's the fish man?

MYSELF: I explained all that to Varney upon my arrival. I should now like to put into the record several significant clues that lead me to believe a conspiracy has taken place.

PINDER: All right, sir. Go to it.

MYSELF: Jot this down. First, the cigarette butts in the ashtray. Second, the clipped hair in the lavatory.

PINDER: Just a minute, Mr. Rickerston, before we get to these clues. Why did you wait all this time before reporting your brother's disappearance?

MYSELF: Frankly, I was afraid.

PINDER: Of what?

MYSELF: Of the conspirators.

PINDER: Was your brother's wife afraid of them too? Is that why

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she also failed to come forward?

(My brother's wife is coming forward now. I just heard the front door slam. She is home from somewhere. And judging by the sharp detonation of her high heels on the parquet, she is in a state of unbridled anger. I must put aside this writing and confront her at last.)

June 10, continued (P.M.): It is quieter now.

For a period it was unbearably noisy. Irene sounded the strident note as soon as she saw me descending the stairs.

"You fool!" she cried out. "You crazy fool!"

"I have been to the police," I said with dignity.

"Don't you think I know that, you dithering idiot." The revulsion in her expression alarmed me. "After all I've done to cover up, you have to go down and shoot your silly mouth off to a bunch of hick cops. Chief of Police Varney was on the phone to me right away."

"I am on to you, Irene," I said. "On to your game."

"Oh, shut up!"

"But I promise not to testify against you if you will satisfy my curiosity on one point."

"I'm going to call Ellis Crimmins," she said.

"So he is the other one," I said. "Our oleaginous psychiatrist. I should have guessed. Do not touch the phone, my dear, until you satisfy my curiosity."

"Get your hands off me, Rick. Let go."

"You are not dealing with Rick now," I said.

"Why, you're crazy, you're absolutely insane! I should never have covered up for you. Let go of me, you brute. Let go!"

"Not until you tell me what you have done with my brother," I said, applying a mite of persuasive pressure with my naturally strong hands. "Not until then."

She began to scream shrilly. It was the most penetrating, nerve-racking scream I have ever heard. And it went on and on for a long time.

But it is quiet now. Yes, the house is pleasantly quiet for the first time in months. Even the maid and the cook have left. I am alone at last.

August 27: I am in a place of white confinement. White floor, white bed, white walls, white ceiling, white bars. Until today I was not certain how long I had been here. Without my diary I lost all track of time, but those in power here would not let me have so much as a pencil until today.

Then with the agreement of a doe-eyed doctor—not Crimmins, rest assured—I have been given this brand-new journal and a ballpoint pen.

"The doc wants you to write out whatever's on your mind," said the pale-faced orderly in the white jacket, trousers, and shoes.

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"After I shave," I said.

"Sure, after you shave, Rick."

In a place of white confinement the simple routines are what keep one alive, and shaving myself after breakfast each morning has become almost a sacred rite.

I use a safety razor and am closely watched.

"My father always employed the old-fashioned equipment," I said, to keep the orderly off guard if possible. "Hard soap lather, beavertail brush, leather strop, straight-edge razor."

"Dad sounds like a doozy, Rick."

"He taught us to shave with the same equipment. By the time Robert and I were twenty-one, we shaved each other every morning. Of course, that little fraternal business stopped after Robert married. Too bad."

"I thought the doc had got you off that delusion, Rick."

"What delusion?"

"The twin-brother bit."

"I know my brother is dead, if that is what you mean."

"Don't you know he doesn't exist, Rick?"

"I know he does not exist now."

The orderly gave a little laugh. "I give up," he said.

I handed him the razor minus the blade. The blade was in the palm of my hand, then in the pocket of my bathrobe. Later I hid it in the spine of this journal.

August 28: Early this morning several men in white entered my white room and searched it fruitlessly for the razor blade. They searched me as well. And one of them flipped the blank pages of this journal.

If they could they would have deprived me of my only weapon of defense against the malevolent forces which spirited away my brother and silenced his wife. And these forces are gathering out there in the darkness of the night, alas!—a subtly creeping blackness against the glaring white of my hideaway.

August 29: Alas, they are suddenly upon me, upon me, upon me

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If you have read William Bankier's previous stories in EQMM ("What Happened in Act One," issue of July 1962, and "The Gag of the Century," issue of February 1965), you will know that his first two stories were as different from each other as one could possibly imagine. Now we give you a third story by Mr. Bankier, and predictably it is completely different from the other two. Here is a human-interest cop story with meanings that dig far below the surface . . .

TRAFFIC VIOLATION

by WILLIAM BANKIER

THROUGH THE OPEN POLICE-STATION doorway Don Cleary saw Billy Kemp leading the prisoner across the deserted market square. The man had white hair and was well dressed in a black suit that glistened in the light of the late August afternoon.

Cleary said into the phone, "Billy Kemp is bringing somebody in."

"Do you want to call me back?" Marney said. Her voice had the flat, tense quality that raised pointless anger in Cleary whenever he heard it. Maybe it was just the way he handled his own fear.

"No, I can talk for a minute. What's Pete's temperature . . . a hundred and what?"

"Almost a hundred and three." Cleary could see her pale face, her dark eyes frowning at the threatening silver thread. "The doctor is coming over."

He waited, watching Kemp and the stranger approaching across the square, listening to his wife's prolonged silence. Then—"Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

"Polio?" she whispered.

"We should have taken him for those shots. All the other kids were getting them."

"I was going to. Don't put that on me, Don."

"Nobody's putting anything on you." He added, "It probably isn't that anyway"—but something told him it very well could be.

The man came in arguing and Cleary disliked him instantly. "I'll have to hang up now," he said. "When the doctor has a look at him, call me right away."

Her goodbye was cold and Cleary wondered how much of it came from her anxiety and how much from his abrupt dismissal of her. He supposed he should have said he'd get Kemp to take over for him so that he could come home. But what good could he do there? The doctor was on the way.

"Okay, you've delayed me, you've

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put me behind schedule. Let me guess what happens next." The prisoner spread his hands. "There's no judge available till tomorrow, so either I pay my fine now or I spend the night in jail."

"You may spend the rest of your life in jail depending on what you did," Cleary said harshly. "Sit down. What's the charge, Billy?"

"He made an illegal left turn at the four corners. When I made him pull over he chewed me out. Must have been ten people listening."

"Why did you have to give the constable a hard time when he was only doing his job?"

"I'm in too big a hurry to waste my time listening to some hick cop lecture me to impress his friends. Now how do I get out of here? I plead guilty to an illegal left turn, okay. Now how do I get out of here?"

The last thing Don Cleary needed on a Sunday afternoon—on this Sunday afternoon in particular—was an out-of-town detention. When Marney called back he would want the place empty and his mind clear. If this bird had only kept his mouth shut he would have been able to send him away with a reprimand.

Cleary thought he would do that anyway, but he heard himself saying, "Now just a minute here, let's not be in too big a hurry. You just have a chair and we'll look into this. What's your name?"

"My name is Sieberling and you're going to be very sorry you ever heard of me."

"Mr. Sieberling, let me see your identification."

The man took out a wallet and began to extract his driver's license from a plastic envelope.

"The whole thing, please."

Sieberling paused, then tossed the wallet across the desk. Cleary could not help noticing the sheaf of paper money in the bill compartment nor could he stop himself from glancing up into the arrogant eyes watching him, registering his discomfiture.

"Don, there's nobody up at the intersection. Maybe I should get back up there."

"Anything else you should tell me about what happened?"

"No. Will you be okay?"

"I don't think Mr. Sieberling wants to get into any more trouble. You go on back."

Constable Kemp walked out of the station and headed back across the empty square. Cleary checked the license: it identified Alvin R. Sieberling, 19 Sun Crescent, Montreal, Canada. The plastic sleeve was one of a dozen joined end to end in an accordion fold. The other sleeves were filled with assorted cards.

"Look, there's just the two of us here and I'm really anxious to get going." The man's sarcastic whine was gone and now his voice vibrated with common sense. "And I'll admit I've put you boys to some trouble. That's my nature, I can be

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a damn fool but it doesn't mean anything. Now why don't you just take out one of those twenties and give the wallet back to me. Then I'll go on my way and we'll both be better off than we are now."

Cleary felt the blood infuse his cheeks and the moisture rim his eyes. He tried to keep his voice steady. "Mr. Sieberling, just you pretend you never said that and I'll try to forget I heard it."

"Well!" The little laugh put Cleary in a category by himself in Sieberling's experience.

Unable to look up until his composure had returned, Cleary riffled through the chain of cards listing credit facilities, airlines, club memberships, and insurance plans.

"Those are credit cards, son. They'll get me just about anything I want, anywhere on this continent, and no questions asked."

"They don't get you the right to drive dangerously in Baytown."

"Dangerously? Come on, you heard what the man said. All I did was make a left turn."

Cleary was fingering the cards. One of the sleeves felt fatter than the others. He pinched it open and found two cards back to back, and between them a folded slip of paper. This proved to be a driver's license in the name of Emery Disco.

"Two drivers' licenses, Mr. Sieberling?" Cleary could hear in the silence the other man's apprehension. He looked up now into the gray eyes and saw no more arrogance there. "That's a bit unusual, isn't it?"

Sieberling's smile returned. "The other one belongs to my partner. Em flew out to his island last week and he forgot some things. Asked me to bring along his license, figures he might rent a car—"

"You had it packed away very carefully."

"Well, where else could I put it and not lose it?"

A Colonial bus from Toronto pulled up in front of the Coronet Hotel and a couple of passengers got out. Cleary watched them perform the slow, confused movements of travelers unaccustomed to dealing with luggage and bellboys and strange, heavy doors. The bus hissed and rolled away.

"Disco. Emery Disco." Cleary fingered the license. "That name is sort of familiar. Disco . . ."

The man said nothing.

"I've seen that name in print somewhere not long ago." Cleary turned to a stack of newspapers on the side table and shuffled through them. Then he stopped. "That was it, sure. The promoter who disappeared last week in Toronto. Started a pig farm and lined up investors for a year and then vanished. A quarter of a million bucks invested and not a sty to show for it."

"You didn't read far enough. There was no evidence against Disco at all."

Cleary got up and went to the doorway. He closed the door. Then

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he crossed the room and opened the barred enclosure that occupied a corner of the small room. "I'm going to have to detain you. Would you go in here, please?" It was Cleary's first arrest apart from an occasional drunk-and-disorderly and one shoplifter. He found himself sounding excessively polite.

The man got up. "My name is Sieberling, son, I can swear to that. And you are making a big mistake."

"I can always apologize."

With the barred door locked, Cleary went back to his desk, picked up the phone, and dialed. "Is the Chief there, Mrs. Kalb? I see. Well, when did he say . . . ? I see. Okay, I'll be here till midnight when Ed comes on, so if he comes in have him call, please. Have him call even after then because I'll brief Ed. Thank you." He hung up the phone and sat down in the swivel chair.

The prisoner took off his jacket and folded it neatly on the end of the cell cot. He came to the barred door in his brilliant white shirt. "Okay," he said, "let's get down to business. Let's straighten this thing out while there's still just the two of us in it. You got insulted when I offered you twenty dollars. Now I'm offering you twenty thousand. Cash."

It was hot in the station with the door closed, but suddenly Don Cleary's damp shirt felt cold against his back.

"Don't say anything," the man went on, "just think about it for a minute. You didn't look closely at the money in my wallet. If you do, you'll see that a lot of those bills are thousands. And I have more in my pocket and in my belt. My friend, I have a hundred and twenty-five thousand dollars on me and as much put away where I can reach it. Twenty grand is yours, right now, if you just open this door. That's all you do. Take twenty thousand out of the wallet, then open the cell and turn your back. Your buddy brought me in for a wrong left turn. He doesn't expect to see me again."

There was a fly in the room. It was restless; *zzzzzz,* silence, *zzzzzzzz,* silence.

"What do you say?"

Cleary picked up the phone. He dialed. "Operator, I want Toronto, Provincial Police headquarters." He gave a number. He waited.

"You're crazy! Throwing away twenty thousand bucks—"

"This is Sergeant Cleary, Baytown Police. I've just apprehended a man who may be Emery Disco. He has a driver's license in that name and another with the name of Sieberling. About fifty-five, I'd say, chunky, white hair, well dressed. Yes, he's in the cell now. No, I don't think there's any doubt. Okay, I'll hold him. Right, I'll expect you around nine—three hours from now. Not at all. Thanks." He hung up.

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The prisoner said, "The funny thing is, you're doing this for nothing. I'll offer *those* guys the same twenty thousand on the way back to Toronto and they'll let me disappear when we stop for gas. Or if they're crazy like you, I'll pay a guard up there. Or if I come to trial, I'll buy the judge. A man with a quarter of a million dollars in cash doesn't go to jail."

In the next hour Cleary ignored the prisoner who stood behind the door or sat on the cot. After further attempts at conversation had failed, Disco became silent. Cleary put his hand on the phone a couple of times, but took it off again. He wanted to call Marney and ask about Pete, but he felt uncomfortable with the other man breathing behind him. The doctor should have been there by now; of course, doctors were hard to pin down on Sunday.

At seven o'clock Cleary telephoned for sandwiches and coffee. When the boy from the Paragon Restaurant delivered the food, Sieberling wanted to pay.

"Keep your money," Don said. "You're a guest of the city of Baytown."

Sieberling insisted on tipping the boy anyway. Then he ate standing at the cell door. "When those cops from Toronto come and take me out of here at nine o'clock, I guess you'll feel pretty good, won't you?"

"I want you gone, sure."

"You're the only man I know who doesn't need money."

"I need money as much as the next man."

"But you don't want my money."

"I want it."

"Then why don't you take it?"

"Because I can't!"

The prisoner heard the high ring of impatience in Cleary's voice. He took his coffee and moved to the back of the cell.

The Paragon always made Cleary a good sandwich and this was one of their best. But it tasted flat in his mouth and he had trouble swallowing. There was nothing wrong with the prisoner's appetite; the wet sounds in the cell were like animal noises from a cave. Cleary put the sandwich aside and drank black coffee.

Marney telephoned at a quarter to eight. "The doctor just left. He says Pete has to go to the hospital. They'll do tests tomorrow and see what it is."

"It's the best thing, honey. They'll take care of him there. How are you getting him to the hospital?"

"He called the ambulance from here. They have to be paid right away, don't they?"

"I think so. There's two ten-dollar bills in the cuff-link box on my bureau. It shouldn't be more than that."

"All right. Don, he's asking for you. When can you get over and see him?"

"I'm not through here till twelve. You know that."

"But Billy Kemp comes in to

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check out at eight, doesn't he? You could ask him to sit in for you."

"I can't tonight. There's something I have to attend to."

"Can't Billy do it?"

"No. Tell Pete I'll see him tomorrow." Marney didn't understand and he couldn't explain with Sieberling listening. The conversation ended on a hostile note.

Ten minutes later Billy Kemp came in to end his shift. He was delighted when he learned he had apprehended a wanted man. He stood for some minutes at the door of the cell looking in. The prisoner ignored him and after a while Billy turned in his gear and went home.

With him went Cleary's last chance to ring in a substitute and get over to the hospital. He should have asked Kemp to stay. Marney would be alone now. Once he could explain, she'd probably understand and forgive him. Or would she? He was assuming that Billy Kemp would be a sucker for Sieberling's offer—$20,000!—accepting the money and putting it away somewhere, and then taking his chances with the authorities later. Could he think that little of his friend's moral fiber? Apparently he could. But meanwhile, Marney was sweating it out by herself.

"Sickness in the family, son?"

"It's under control."

"I know what it's like. I'm a lot older than you are. Thirty-five years ago we didn't have the medical facilities you have now, and I couldn't afford what there was. Daughter of mine got sick and I didn't even have taxi fare to get her to the hospital. I carried her in my arms and she was dead when I got there."

Was it phony or straight goods? Cleary looked at the broad ruddy face beneath the even white hairline. The gray eyes were level with no sign of sentiment. "I'm sorry to hear that."

"Well, it was a long time ago. I made up my mind then that no child of mine would ever lack for money again. I started getting my hands on money and I haven't stopped since. Only thing is, I never had another child. I guess there's a moral in there somewhere"

Cleary checked his watch. In less than an hour the Toronto police would arrive and he'd be off the hook. His thoughts went back to Pete. Maybe he should phone the hospital, but he didn't like to do that either with Sieberling listening. It could wait forty-five minutes.

"Why do you want me in jail so badly, son?"

"The law wants you, and I work for the law."

"But let's drop the textbook interpretations and be human beings. What did I do that was so bad? Did I kill somebody? Did I take bread out of a hungry child's mouth?"

"It's possible. You stole a lot of money."

"Let me tell you something. The people who put in that money were *looking* to be taken. They listened

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to me spin them a fairy tale about profits a hundredfold. It was nonsense and they believed me. Instead of putting their money in sensible investments where it would do the economy some good, they were greedy. It's the old story—they wanted something for nothing, something they hadn't earned."

"I suppose you earned it?"

"Matter of fact, yes, I did. I worked damned hard for a year promoting this thing. But the point is, the money I got was lying around in socks and mattresses, hoarded by a lot of mean little people who didn't need it and weren't using it. Now does that make me such an evil man?"

The telephone rang and Cleary picked up the receiver. It was one of the Toronto detectives. They were in a garage in Cobourg having some motor trouble attended to. Would he be okay for another hour?

It seemed like a long time and Cleary said so. No, he wasn't having any difficulties but he wanted this man off his hands. And he didn't say so, but he wanted to be alone to call the hospital and have a doctor tell him first-hand that the early fear was wrong, that Pete just had the flu, and he wanted to call Marney and tell her why he wasn't up there with her. Most of all, he wanted to hear her tell him he had done the right thing.

The phone call ended with the Toronto detective saying he would do everything he could to get there sooner.

Cleary put down the phone and listened to ten minutes tick by on his wrist watch. He got up and opened the station door. It was almost dark in the market square. The orange light from the Coronet Hotel lobby spilled through the front window onto the street. He could see the bellboy leaning on the glass counter talking to the desk clerk. A lone car cruised down Front Street toward the Bay. Cleary turned back to his desk.

"I guess you'll have a lot of doctor bills to pay next month."

"Will you shut up about that?"

"No, son, I won't. I'm trying to get myself out of a jam and the only way I can see is to talk some sense into you."

Cleary opened his desk drawer, looked at the forms and paper clips and a broken stapler. He slammed it shut again.

"Now it's true we're not alone in this any more. Those boys from the city will be coming in here looking for me, but we could handle that. I'm a pretty husky guy. Suppose I wanted to go to the john and when you let me out of here, I jumped you and clobbered you. We could make it real. I'll give you a good one you won't be ashamed of. When you come to, I'll be long gone. First, of course, you'll have to take the trouble of hiding the twenty thousand."

"Save your breath, Sieberling."

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The prisoner laughed again, the short rising laugh of disbelief. "You just don't make any sense! Somewhere, somebody is going to take the payoff and let me go. And he won't be half the man you are. Believe me, as long as I have to spend the money, I'd rather see you get it. You need it."

Cleary got up and went to the cell door. He stood looking into Sieberling's eyes. He was having trouble breathing steadily. "Maybe you'd like to go to the john," he said. "You're welcome to take that shot at me on the way."

The prisoner laughed. "Without the fix being in? No, thanks, you look too serious."

The detectives arrived half an hour later, two of them. One of them went directly to the cell and looked in. "This is him all right. Nice going."

The other detective said, "Can I use the phone?"

"Go ahead."

He began dialing the Toronto area code. "Hello? This is Donovan. We're here and we're picking up Disco right now. We'll drive straight back without stops and we should be there before midnight. Okay, Inspector. Right."

The first detective had his handcuffs out. When Cleary opened the cell door, the detective stepped in and snapped one band around the prisoner's wrist, the other around his own. Then he walked him to the door.

"We're not stopping on the way back because we don't want to take any chances with this one."

Cleary knew what he had to say, but it wasn't easy. He stood in the front doorway, blocking the exit. He took a deep breath and ran his tongue across his teeth.

"I'm going to say something. I hope you won't take it wrong."

"Go ahead."

"Well, this man has been offering me twenty grand all night to let him go. He said he's going to offer it to you guys on the way back. So if he escapes, you'd better have a real good story ready."

The detective handcuffed to the prisoner stared hard at Cleary, his face coloring. Then he glanced at his partner and grinned. "Well," he said, "there goes our chance to get rich."

When they were gone, Cleary telephoned the hospital. Pete was resting and they could say nothing more until after the tests tomorrow.

Next, he called Marney. She sounded cold. "I went in the ambulance with him and hung around the hospital for a while. Another doctor spent some time with him and he said he doesn't think it's what we're worried about."

"God, I'm glad to hear that. What do they think it is?"

"Maybe some virus or other. He may even be home tomorrow." She paused. "So you won't have to go to the hospital if you don't want to."

Cleary spent the next few min-

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utes explaining about the prisoner. When he was finished, she said softly and with a trace of her old warmth, "So we could have had $20,000? Honey, rich you'll never be."

"Did I do the right thing?"

"You did the only thing. How could we ever spend that kind of money?"

It was ten minutes later when Nick Pappas from the Paragon Restaurant came in with the delivery boy in front of him, stumbling before Nick's outstretched arm.

"Don, I think this dumb kid I hired has done a bad thing. I found him counting money, twenty bucks. I thought he stole it from the cash register but there was none missing. So I twisted his arm a little and he gave me this note. Says a man in the cell gave it to him with a ten-dollar tip."

Cleary took the note. It was written in ballpoint pen on a page torn from a pocket notebook. "This $10 is yours. Phone 639-8001 in Kingston, ask for Donovan and say Disco is in Baytown jail. If you do this fast, he will come and give you another $10."

Cleary read the note again. Then he said, "I'll have to keep this as evidence. I won't lock the kid up if you'll promise to keep an eye on him. He'll have to face charges."

"Okay, Don. I'm sorry about this."

"Not your fault, Nick. Thanks for coming in."

As they were leaving, Cleary said, "Why did you do it, son? You knew he was a criminal."

The boy looked him right in the eye. "Twenty bucks is a whale of a lot of money," he said.

They went away and Don Cleary sat down alone to wait for the Toronto detectives to arrive.

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Meet David Anderson, not yet seventeen, a page at the Public Library. Young David is an excellent math and science student—he likes all subjects that require the use of logic and reasoning; he likes the challenge of a problem to be solved; and he is unusually observant . . . Yes, you're right: David has all the qualifications for a detective. (And the adult detectives, even the famous ones, had better watch out: David will be the new Thinking Machine, the human computer, when he grows up!)

IN THE FICTION ALCOVE

by NEDRA TYRE

DAVID ANDERSON SLID ACROSS THE sidewalk outside the Public Library. The arctic wind mauled him like an enemy, barring him from the doorway. The night belonged to Siberia or the North Pole, not to Georgia. David stumbled into a snowdrift. Luckily he had sheltered his history book inside his sweater or it would have been ruined by the snow. The ice made a treacherous carpet on the steps and he skidded across it. He pushed against the revolving door and the bright lights in the lobby stung his eyes. The heat, after his two-block walk from the bus stop, was a caress.

He nodded and smiled at Mrs. English at the Information Desk and walked back to the Circulation Department cloakroom to hang up his coat. The bunched wire hangers made exotic tinkling sounds like some kind of Asiatic musical instrument as he reached for one, and a small snowstorm swirled from his jacket when he hung it up. He glanced at himself in the mirror above the wash basin and saw that his face was pinched and fire-engine red from the cold, and his hair looked as if he wore a fright wig. He combed his hair and consulted his watch. He was exactly on time for his job as a library page.

David went to the Main Desk in the lobby. He grappled with the books in the return bin and stacked them into the hand truck. A book shinnied from his grasp and spread-eagled on the tile floor.

At the Information Desk, Mrs. English looked up from *Publishers' Weekly* and said in a voice that was teasing and yet somehow serious, "Please be careful, David. The patrons ruin the books quickly enough. They don't need your help." She was a new staff member; she was tall and glamorous and from her first day all the pages had eaten out of her hand.

"Yes, ma'am," David said.

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Mrs. English resumed her reading of *Publishers' Weekly* and picked up a pencil. She made check marks against a list and her bracelets struck against each other as if to applaud her efficiency.

David guided the truck back to the sorting shelves in the pages' workroom and lined up the books according to the catalogue numbers on their spines. Then he went back to the cloakroom to get his history book. He must explain to Mrs. English that he had to study. "Look, Mrs. English"—he rehearsed again the speech he had devised on the bus—"I've got a history exam tomorrow. History's my weakest subject—a scholarship may depend on the grade I make tomorrow. I changed work nights with Joe. I worked for him last night so I could study tonight, and I had just finished supper and settled down to study when Joe's mother called to say that he had a fever and couldn't possibly go out. It was too late to ask anybody else to work for me. So I'll have to study some tonight."

He propped open the door to give him a view of the Main Desk so that he could take care of any patrons who might come in to return books, and then he riffled through his history book to the section on the French Revolution.

Then he glanced at Mrs. English. He couldn't admit to anybody as attractive as she was that he was in a jam. He couldn't parade his foolishness over having to cram at the last minute. There would be no studying in the library.

Miss Jones, of the Business and Industry Department, sauntered over to the Main Desk and said, "We should be closed on a night like this. All the stores closed at four thirty this afternoon. It's stupid for the library to be open. There hasn't been a soul in B and I tonight and there've been only three telephone calls."

The telephone on the Information Desk rang and Mrs. English answered. Her voice matched the rest of her; the words seemed to enjoy being on her tongue. "How dear of you to call," she said and then she turned her head slightly so that Miss Jones and David could not overhear her conversation. In spite of her height of nearly six feet she looked small and delicate and utterly feminine.

"That will be the Chairman of the Library Board," Miss Jones whispered. "Mrs. English sure works fast. She's been in town only three months and the gossip is that she and the chairman are already engaged. And the gossip also is that this will be her third marriage."

"Yes, ma'am," David said. He didn't want to discuss anyone as exciting as Mrs. English with dowdy, capable Miss Jones.

"That's a good boy, David. Don't commit yourself. But romance is interesting—anybody's romance, especially when you deal all the time

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as I do with charts and figures and graphs and percentages. Anyway, I've a lot of work to do whether there are any patrons or not and I must get busy."

Miss Jones walked back to the deserted Business and Industry Department.

The buzzer in the pages' workroom signaled three times. That meant that the Reference Department needed David, and he hurried down the wide central hall. Miss Lenox seemed helpless and forlorn, even though everyone knew she had more facts in her head than a computer. She pointed across the rows of empty tables and chairs to a bent figure.

"David, please wake up that old man and try to persuade him to leave. He's not supposed to sleep here, you know, and he's been napping for about half an hour."

David touched the frayed cuff of the old man's coat.

The old man woke up immediately. "I wasn't asleep," he said. "And whoever says I was is a liar. This place belongs to me as much as to anybody. It's for the general public. You can't put me out."

"You ought to go home," David said. "It's not safe for you to be out in weather like this."

The old man got up and shuffled down the hall. He toddled through the revolving door, then ran back inside. "It's the principle of the thing," he shouted, waving his hand angrily at David. "I ain't about to go. You can't make me. I'm entitled to stay until you close up for the night. I'm a citizen and I've got my rights."

"Yes, sir," David said and watched the old man slump into a chair in the Business and Industry Department.

Miss Lenox buzzed again from the Reference Department and asked David to get a microfilm of the May 5, 1955 edition of *The New York Times* and help a patron thread it on a viewer. When David had located the film the patron said, "It's foolish to do any research on a night like this. I'd better go home. I'm sorry to have bothered you."

After that David had no work. There was nothing at all to occupy him. The return bin was empty; the buzzer was silent. On ordinary nights he was run off his feet.

David went back to the pages' room. He looked at his history text and then he craned around to see what Mrs. English was doing. He really ought to be studying; his false pride was foolish; he would ask permission since he had nothing else to do. He approached Mrs. English's desk.

"There's not much to do tonight, Mrs. English. So I was wondering —"

But he couldn't go on. He couldn't ask her for a favor. If it had been Miss Wilson with whom he usually worked it would have been simple, but not Mrs. English, and so he said, "We don't usually shelve

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books at night but since there's nothing else I was wondering if I could work in the stacks. If you need me at the front desk you can buzz for me."

"That will be fine," Mrs. English said and she gave him a dazzling smile that made him feel as if he were twenty-one instead of going on seventeen.

David scooped up books and put them on the hand truck, then guided the truck toward the stacks. A small, neatly dressed man browsed in the 300 section and when he saw David slow down the truck he said, "Am I in your way? I'll be glad to move."

"No, thank you," David said. "I can work some other place." Well, at least the man was considerate. Some patrons acted as if they owned every book in the library—there was no budging them away from a shelf.

David brought the truck to a stop and saw that a whole row of books was out of order. He rearranged them and then slid in the books from the truck. David peered around the shelves and saw that the man had left the 300 section and he pushed the truck there. He quickly finished the shelving, trundled the hand truck to its corner in the pages' room, and checked at the front desk. No one had returned any books.

David slumped onto the stool behind the desk and glanced toward the display case. A small placard invited patrons to share their private collections with the public by lending them to the library. At present there was a loan of glass paperweights; most of them were round, though a cube-shaped one shone at the end of the middle shelf. Their colors and designs fascinated David; they seemed to have flowers imprisoned inside them.

It was strange and interesting, David thought, what people collected—he had liked best the exhibition of Japanese samurai swords—and how much money they spent on collections; the display case was kept locked and the library carried insurance on the loans.

It was only eight o'clock. There was another hour to go. Even on busy nights the last hour was long. On a night like tonight nine o'clock would never come. Then there was no telling how soon he would get a bus in this kind of weather, and he was tired; he yawned, and when his mother saw how tired he was she'd want him to go to bed instead of to study. She felt guilty because she couldn't earn enough to support him, as if it were her fault that his father had died after being an invalid for five years.

David began to yawn again, but then a disturbing vision alerted him: he could see his history paper marked with a big fat F.

He eased off the stool. At night when there was slack time it was part of his job to straighten chairs

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and pick up paper and trash dropped by careless patrons, gather up left articles, return newspapers and magazines to their racks. He made a circuit of the first floor. Everything was tidy. There was nothing at all that needed his attention. The old man had left Business and Industry and had gone back to the Reference Department. He was fast asleep again.

Miss Lenox looked from the sleeping man to David and gave a philosophical shrug. "I've wakened him twice and he's gone right back to sleep."

The buzzer signaled once.

That was the Information Desk. Mrs. English needed David and he spun around. Miss Lenox laughed at how quickly David responded. "Really, David, you pages and Mrs. English!"

He trotted down the hall to the front of the building. Mrs. English was waving a call slip at him.

"A patron wants these back issues of *Harper's* magazine," she said.

"Yes, ma'am," David said and took the slip. "I'll get them right away."

He whirled around and went toward the back stairs. He looked again at the call slip. They were back issues all right, all the way back to 1940, and they were deep in the subbasement.

He pounded down the circular iron stairway to the basement, opened and closed the door there, and then descended the stairway to the subbasement. One dim light in a wire cage made the place scary and full of menace. David reached for the keys in his pocket and isolated the one to unlock the door leading to the closed stacks.

His hands shook and he knew it was silly to be afraid. But it was such a weird night—he was used to commotion and the continuous flow and demands of the patrons and the staff. His fingers fumbled for the switch and the bright lights flaring across the neat, orderly volumes made him feel safer. All the same he wished he were home studying the French Revolution and drinking his mother's hot cocoa.

He inspected the dates printed on the bindings. Just his luck; what he needed was on the top shelf. He dragged a ladder over from against the wall and positioned it, then climbed up. The top shelf was heavy with dust and he sneezed, almost losing his balance; then he grabbed the volume he needed and scampered down the ladder. He turned off the lights, locked the door, and mounted the stairs. Then he made the long march back to the Information Desk.

Mrs. English took the bound magazines from David and thanked him; then she went toward the stacks.

David returned to his perch on the stool behind the Main Desk, and he scanned the paperweights once more. The one shaped like a

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cube seemed a little farther back on the shelf than he remembered. The cube reminded him of mathematics and of how much he liked math and chemistry and physics—anything that required logic and reasoning, anything that you could figure out. No wonder he did poorly in history with its lack of order and disregard for common sense.

From far across the lobby David watched Miss Clarkson, the registration clerk, yawn. David yawned too and stretched and wondered if time would ever pass, and when he had about given up hope, the clock faltered at last to 8:50.

He flicked the lights off and on, the usual signal to the patrons that it was almost closing time. Ordinarily a large group would then swarm to get their books checked out. But there was no one tonight. David put on his jacket and set his history book on the desk so that he could snatch it and run for the bus the very second it was nine o'clock.

Mrs. English reached into a drawer for an atomizer and some hair spray and went to the rest room. Miss Jones hurried toward the Fiction Alcove. "I think I'd better get a novel or two to take home to my mother," she said. "She won't be able to get out to visit the neighbors in this weather."

Miss Harris from the Music Department on the second floor descended the front stairway. She pulled on her gloves and buttoned her coat and said, "What a wonderful night I've had—not a soul in the Music Department. I had a private concert—nothing but baroque music. Heavenly. I'm so fed up with all the Brahms and Tschaikovsky played day in and day out."

Miss Lenox, carrying a bulging and battered brief case, came out from the Reference Department and the old man who had napped most of the night trotted along beside her. Behind them marched the janitor with a mop. He seemed to be sweeping them down the long hall.

Then Miss Jones ran back to David and clutched his arm. She whispered as if her news was a secret only for David. "Come with me to the Fiction Alcove. I think the man lying on the floor there is dead."

David rushed with Miss Jones to the Fiction Alcove. It was an isolated and pleasant place furnished with two sofas and surrounded on three sides by shelves containing the newest novels still in their dust jackets.

Miss Jones guided David toward the larger sofa and pointed behind it. "I wouldn't have noticed him except that I saw a call slip on the floor near where he's lying. You know how they hound us to keep the place tidy, so I stooped to pick it up and then I saw him."

The call slip was still there. David looked down at it. It had only a catalogue number scrawled in apparent haste. There was no title, nor was there an author's name. The

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figures were almost illegible, but David made them out to be 9142.

Slightly to the right of the call slip the man lay sprawled on his face. The back of his skull was crushed. He was a small slight man whom death had made look even more frail. From his size and clothing David recognized him as the person who had been browsing in the 300 section earlier that night and had offered to move if David needed to work there.

"The police will have to be notified. You telephone them, Miss Jones, and I'll tell the others."

Everything was suddenly complicated and involved. There was no way to know now when they could go home.

Goodbye history examination. So long scholarship. And wasn't he a fine one to be worried about a grade when a man had been murdered?

Miss Harris was already on the front steps when David called her back. Miss Lenox grabbed her brief case close as if it could save her from the tragic news. The old man stood shaking his head. Mrs. English frowned and bit her lips and the registration clerk stopped yawning and began to cry very softly.

Miss Jones came back from the telephone full of authority. "No one can leave," she said, "and nobody is to go near the Fiction Alcove."

They stood in an uneasy herd in the middle of the lobby. They were dressed in heavy coats and boots and they had the desolate look of stranded passengers who had just received an announcement that their flight had been cancelled and there was no knowing how many hours would elapse before another flight would be available.

Their moroseness disturbed David and to escape it he pushed through the revolving door. Outside there was no traffic and no sign of the police.

David glanced again at the people huddled together. He was sorry, of course, for the murdered man and he wondered which one of the persons he was looking at had killed him. On an ordinary night with all the coming and going of hundreds of patrons it might have been impossible to find the murderer. But this was no ordinary night. Only the old man could be innocent as he was feeble and had been asleep.

But any one of the staff would have had a chance to do it. Miss Jones could have left the B and I Department through the workroom door in back and gone to the Fiction Alcove. It would have been easy for Miss Lenox to slip down the back hall from the Reference Department, and Miss Harris in the Music Department could have used the back stairway. Miss Clarkson, the registration clerk, and Mrs. English at the Information Desk were usually in view of each other, but Mrs. English had to move about to consult the catalogue and

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to show patrons how to find books in the stacks.

Except that night there had been no patrons.

There had been a few early in the evening but they had all hurried home to escape the weather. No, David was mistaken. There had been two others—the man who had been murdered and the patron who had asked for the bound magazines.

The wind whipped David. The cold was brutal. Once more he gazed at the people in the lobby.

David liked the challenge of a problem to be solved. He was fascinated by formulas; at school he relished all the subjects that gave some known factors from which unknown ones could be derived.

Well, there were various known factors about what had happened that night. A man lay dead and somebody in that small huddle had killed him. Certain events had occurred. He thought of that long, slow, unending night—and then he saw how simple it was to name the murder. He did not know why the murder had been committed, but he knew how it had been done and by whom.

He must think about the facts and nothing else. He had to consider it simply as a problem—because identifying someone as a murderer was more than a school assignment, and naming a murderer was more than he could bear.

At that moment the entourage from the Police Department swept up and the still, cold night was defiled by sudden noises and movements.

A man climbed across a mound of snow and the wind made a pennon of his scarf. He approached David. "I'm Williams of Homicide. Will you please show us where to go?"

The staff members and the old man edged back when the police entered and David led the way to the Fiction Alcove. Then, not wanting to look at the dead man, he pointed across the expanse to the sofa. "He's over there," David said.

Their efficiency and the way they went about their business fascinated David, but he ought to tell them what he knew before they proceeded any further. He didn't want to seem brash, but after all there were laws saying that you must not withhold evidence.

"Captain Williams," he began.

The officer turned immediately toward David. "As a matter of fact, I'm a Lieutenant."

"There are some facts I can give you, Lieutenant."

"Good," Lieutenant Williams said. He looked grateful, and not as if he were dealing with a young smart aleck. "Go right ahead."

"Well, sir, the murder weapon was one of those glass paperweights in the display case near the front desk. Most of them are round. But the one used to do the murder is a cube. Anyone on the staff could

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have taken it out because everyone knows where the keys are kept. So you'll need more to go on than that, and I can give you more.

"Once tonight I was used. I was sent on an errand for a volume in the subbasement when I don't think anyone had requested it. I had to be got out of the way because I was the only one moving around and the only one who might go to the Fiction Alcove at the time the murder was committed.

"Even with that you won't have enough to name the murderer. But the man who was killed did that. He wrote it on a call slip. I saw him earlier in the stacks and he wasn't afraid then. He looked just like any browser. But later he must have realized he was in danger. Anyway, before he died he wrote 9142 on a call slip. Anybody working in a library would know that 914.2 has to do with England—therefore, with Mrs. English."

The astonished police officer looked at David for a long time before he asked some questions; and then he thanked the boy.

"You've given us everything but the motive," Williams said. "But we'll dig that out ourselves."

(But without David's evidence Mrs. English might never have confessed, as she did the next day, that she had murdered her estranged husband, a librarian in an out-of-state technical school, because he'd refused to give her a divorce so she could marry the Chairman of the Library Board.)

"And now," David asked, "may I go home? This whole business makes me feel sick—I can't tell you how I—how all of us—felt about Mrs. English. She was beautiful—and to think that it was me who—well—besides, I've got to study for a history exam tomorrow."

"I'm afraid you can't go yet. You've given us the solution but statements must be taken down and reports made out, so you'll have to stick around for a while. I can't believe you'll ever have trouble with *any* kind of test. But I can give you some news you must have missed. All schools will be closed tomorrow because of the bad weather. So you'll have tomorrow and the whole week-end to study for your examination."

David smiled. He was weary and upset, but the news was welcome. He smiled again.

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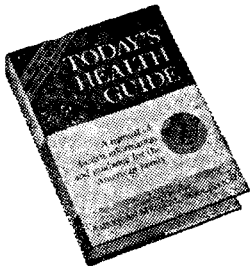

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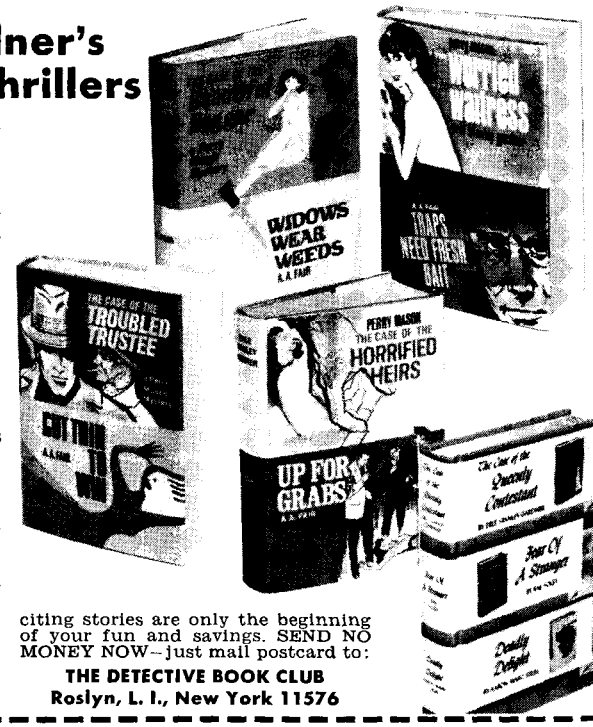

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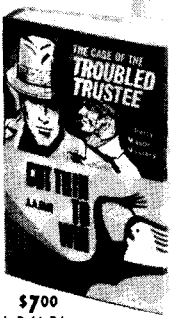

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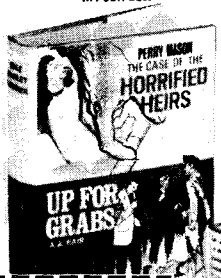

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